a swift and vivid tale of modern piracy in Malay waters,
urn to T. T. Flynn's novelette "Malacca" in this issue. - - - W. C.

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Everybody's

January 1929

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A Desert Town Mystery Novel

by RAYMOND S. SPEARS

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Kills germs in 15 seconds

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January, 1929
Vol. LX No. 1

Everybody's

WILLIAM CORCORAN
Editor

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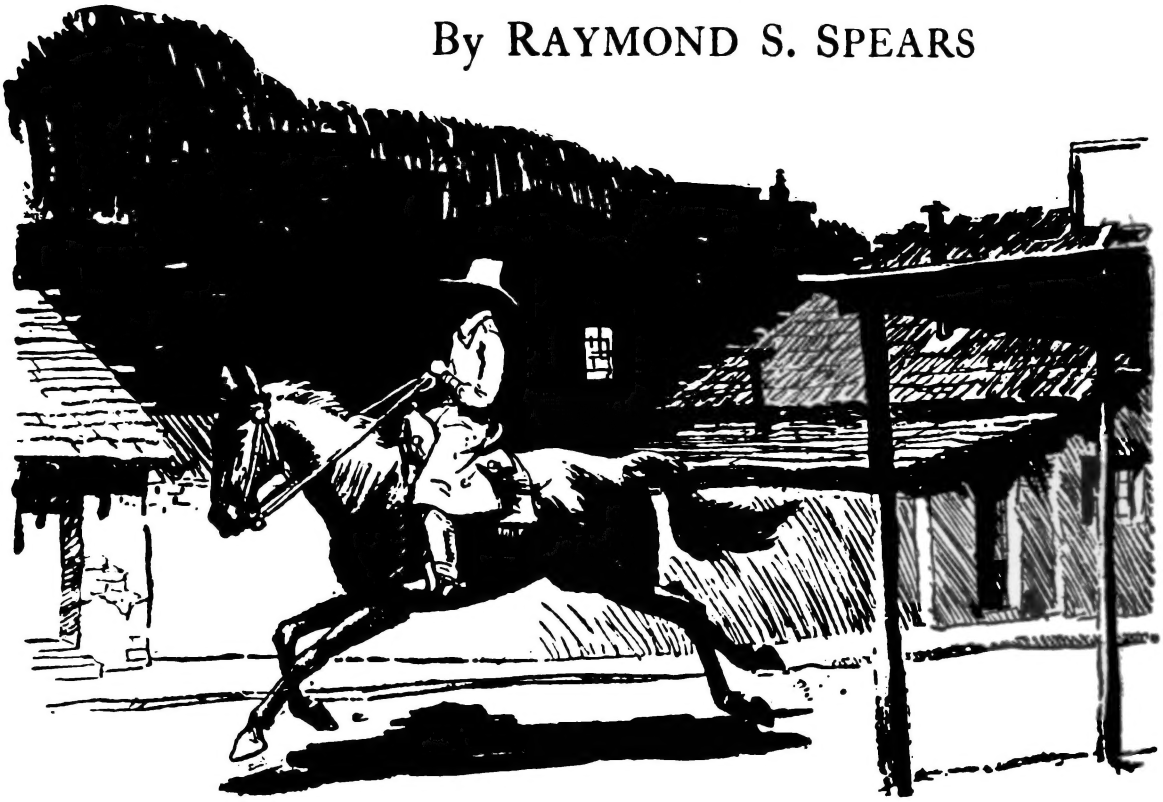
PROOFS POSITIVE

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS



CHAPTER I

THE NEW JAIL

THERE were two minds about the reinforced concrete steel prison which had been built for the sheriff's department in Sun Pasture County. The idea was to save the county the expense of boarding prisoners in secure restraint elsewhere and also to bid for accommodation of culprits from other counties not yet in a position or mood to have cages of their own. A new bond issue made the project irksome to some people.

Jerry Macon, 27 years of age, accused of loitering, was the first prisoner. He went up for 40 days less 1. To have only one so insignificant a prisoner in so expensive a house of detention enabled the wits to exercise their fires in scorn and stinging remarks. Raining Sands, the county seat, consisted largely of dobe and other one story buildings spread over a wide domain. The jail loomed huge, even in comparison with the courthouse, which was a small dobe structure eventually to be replaced by an adequate brick and concrete residence of the Law.

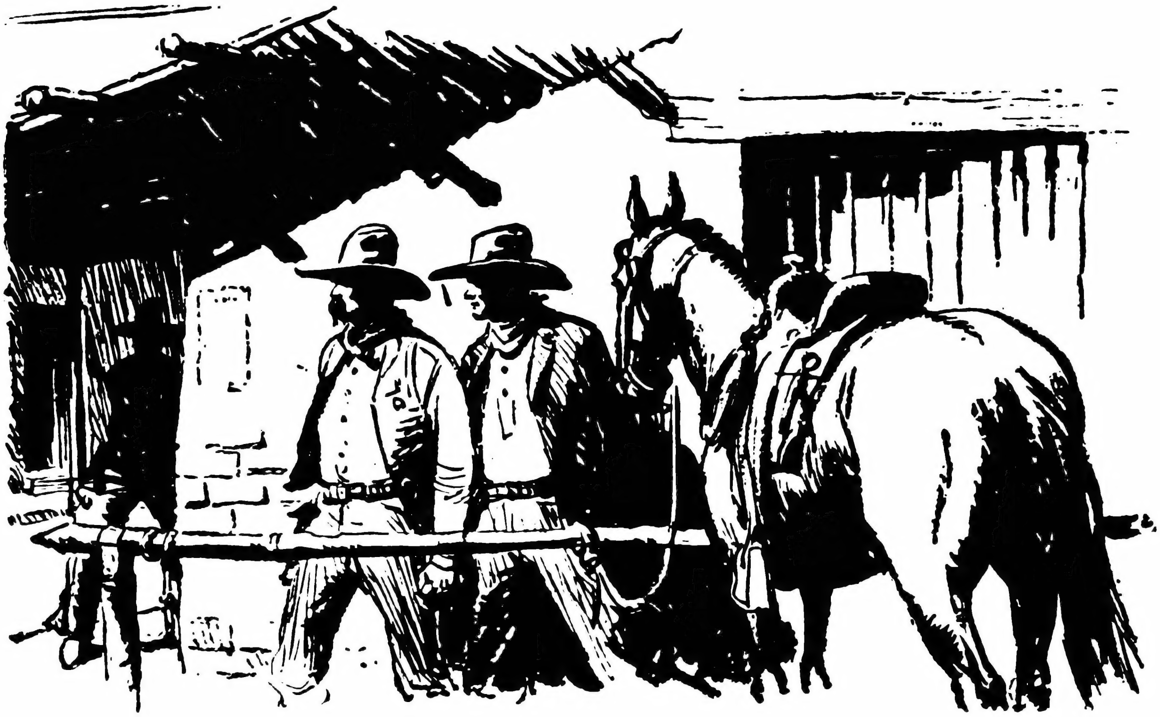
Emma Dolind, daughter of the sheriff, took particular offense when she read the covert slurs in the *Sun Foundry* which was edited by Deck Rankin. Especially she resented one item which she clipped for reference:

> OCCUPIED!
>
> Sheriff Dolind is rejoicing in the fact that his new Pen de Luxe is now occupied by an unwilling resident, a tiny fellow about the size of a gopher and therefore a good test of the security of the jail. A new cage is apt to have a few holes and exits overlooked. So, if Jerry the Lingerer does not slip out, we can breathe in peace, knowing that a more important bird or beast will not be able to dig, climb or burst out—an important consideration if some of the desperadoes rambling around at large in our bright and happy land ever happen to be caught. A hobo must feel embarrassed by such munificent surroundings, so much lug put on for so trivial a purpose.

Emma Dolind knew how square and unflinching her father was. She neither cared nor understood the exigencies of county affairs, but in a purely personal capacity she headed for the office of the offending newspaper, looking for the editor who had aroused her ire.

She had known Rankin long enough for his offense to seem that much worse. He

A Thrilling Complete Novel of a Murder Mystery that Baffled a Western Desert Town



was clever, handsome and one of her own kind of people. As she entered, she saw his face light with a quick smile of welcome, which gave her an advantage she had not anticipated. Instantly she attacked him with a tongue as sharp as his own and with a cruel boldness beyond his own careless humor and clever words.

She sought to hurt him with every word, glance and gesture. And she rejoiced in his visible wincing. When, for want of breath, she paused, he told her some things she had never known. Rankin, too, had his grievances. He had had advantage taken of his inexperience, his youthfulness, his lack of friends; and even his high ideals had been slurred. And when he had had his say, she stood nonplused by this view of the other side of things. It was true. Her father had scorned the outsider with more education than experience. Surprised, with no word for rebuttal, she scurried forth—for once, speechless.

Bystanders carried the story of her rebuff to her father who was angry at the interference with his affairs.

"Look here, Emma," he told her angrily, "I wish you'd mind your own business. I can take care of my job without your help. What'll the boys think, you running around protecting me with petticoats!"

She laughed gayly in his face; for she had her way, always. She came and went as she pleased. Catching the hem of her skirt, making a pair of wings, she danced a saucy measure, her heels and toes twinkling. He knew she had learned that down at the Tivle Dance Hall, to which, perhaps, had she had a mother's watchful training, she would never have gone.

She knew everybody. She understood all the books she read and now she was meddling in what her father called his own affairs. She mocked his helplessness and exasperation, and then coaxed him back to smiling admiration and pride. Sheriff Dolind was a two hundred pound, rotund, smooth shaven, hardy man. He was unflinchingly honest in his performance of every duty as he saw it. He could boss everyone but his own daughter, whose caprice was much the more interesting because of her wilfulness.

Having snapped her fingers in an editor's face, forcing explanations, and having laughed her father into good nature, the whimsy took her to order her horse saddled for a ride in the starlight. No one ever knew what to expect of her. One time she had even ridden down the street, shooting it up for excitement. And her own father had demanded that the city recorder punish her exuberance of spirits by sending her to jail. Instead, the judge fined her ten dollars and remarked that Raining Sands needed some excitement once in a while.

"Lend me ten dollars!" she asked her father, who turned his back in one of his bursts of disciplinary temper, stalking out of the courtroom.

"I'll pass the hat," said the city marshal, grinning; he had made the arrest. And so everybody chipped in to make up the sum of the punishment.

Nearly three hours after Emma Dolind was seen riding out into the desert night, the Tivle Dance Hall on the Busy Corner was in its usual Saturday night stride, noisy, joyous, and doing a big business. The music was strident and wailing, booming in the desert gloom. Dancers were pounding the floor with rhythmic stamp and scuffle. The gamblers, far quieter, were playing at their various specialties, the games running high and reckless. The bar was lined with a clientele who came and went.

Wakeful Sam Lucern was the proprietor, a slithery, sharp featured, cunning man of medium height and swift gracefulness. He moved back and forth noiselessly. His quick eyes noted details: the gamblers at the tables, how their stacks stood; the bartenders, whether they were working right; the floor manager, whether he was keeping the music according to the merrymakers' desires and if he was properly holding in check the reckless, keeping everything far within the bounds prescribed by his own innate sense of propriety and good business.

Tonight he was particularly pleased with the appearances. The intake was unusually heavy and profitable. There wasn't a sorehead anywhere making a nuisance of himself. The laughter was really gay. The losers along the tables were taking their luck in good part; and there were winners, too, who showed that the house was on the level. There wasn't a jarring note anywhere in the vibrant undertone.

ABOUT eleven o'clock Lucern slipped around to take up surpluses and to empty the tills at the bar and the ticket office. He filled a good sized canvas bag with stacks of metal and wads of paper money, currency of many kinds. When the round had been made, he carried the toll upstairs into the office, where he emptied it on a hardwood table with a polished surface, and with swift, accustomed fingers sorted out the small stuff and shaped up the large certificates in bank clerk's stacks. He had four thousand, six hundred and seventy eight dollars by the tallies, and he turned with a glow of satisfaction toward the vaultlike safe which had been bricked into the center of the big building.

Throwing the combination, a turn this way and a half that, he opened the thick door and snapped out the wide, deep cash drawer. On the instant a light, mocking voice, feminine and low, chuckled in his ear, as something prodded against his spine, not too gently.

"Up—so!" he heard.

Lucern froze, helpless. He tended to his money alone. No one saw the inner details of the Tivle Dance Hall finances. He felt his own revolver drawn from its holster under his coat; and then a small hand swiftly frisked the two automatics which he kept flat and convenient up under his armpits. Lucern started to face about, but as he did so, the intruder's voice gave swift warning:

"You turn your nose and I'll sure make a bridge opening through it. Get over into the corner there!"

Lucern's nose was pointed, prominent. He felt a certain assurance that the invader would spoil his rather good looks. He started for the corner, and took a sidelong glance into the mirror he had thoughtfully placed on the wall. He stopped short, amazed by what he saw.

He had seen Emma Dolind too often, knew her too well, not to recognize this slim, trim, girlish figure in her skirt, riding boots, gauntlets, ornate ammunition belt and pretty holsters.

He had watched her a long time, speculatively, wondering when she would make a serious break in her reckless exuberance. Raining Sands offered one of her tremendous activity little enough to do. She craved occupation, demanded something going on.

He might have surmised she would sometime undertake a holdup just for the excitement and adventure. And there she was. Sure—it was a joke!

As Lucern stopped in the corner like a dunce, he heard the currency from his cash drawer in the vault chunking and plopping into the canvas bag on top of the close packed contents. He chuckled, for she was carrying her joke to a point where it had a tang to it. He grinned as he reflected that unquestionably some of the boys had seen her come and allowed her to sneak in on him. They, too, probably were in on the humor of it. Anyhow, they wouldn't interfere with the sheriff's daughter if she wanted to go into Lucern's office. Hardly!

A quick breath and the soft sound of footfalls indicated the end of the job. The holdup had the money bagged, and now would be a good time to laugh and let the girl know how appreciative the victim was of such a genuine piece of good humor which would go big in Raining Sands. Sure!

Wakeful Sam lowered his hands and turned, a smile beginning to break across his countenance. On the instant there was a crashing shot and through the gambler's large nose, creasing his cheek on both sides smashed a bullet. The blow blinded him for the instant, as he grabbed with both hands at the bridge. Undercut, as the holdup had promised!

Lucern staggered, leaning against the table, shaking his head and blinking, trying to see. Dimly he was able to make out the things as they instantly continued to happen. The light went out as the invader switched off the globes in the office. The door flung open. The yelps and cries, as those outside greeted the heavy shot, showed that attention was instant.

As the holdup ran out into the upper landing, there was a yell and then another shot. The scream of a hard hit man in frightful agony. The running patter of light feet and the scurrying about of a crowd, none of whom knew what to do.

The wounded man outside fell to the floor heavily. Lucern recognized the voice. It was Dickers, his special manager guard who always hung around at money collecting time.

"Catch her! Stop her!" Lucern shouted, recovering first. "The back way. Around the front. Hustle!"

Then Lucern dropped on his knees beside the wounded man, who, after the first hurt, quieted and immediately began to whisper in his employer's ear.

"I seen 'twas sheriff's girl, so I thought 'twas all right," the guard said. "Course, I did! I seen her come in out the back, along the corridor in here upstairs. I tell you I knowed her!"

"Don't tell nobody else!" Lucern begged. "Don't let on! Sheriff's a friend of mine. Emma's run hog wild! At the same time—likely it's just foolishness. Anyhow—Dolind's been friendly."

"I'll keep still, sure," the wounded man promised. "I'm done, Lucern. Pull off my boots, will yo'? Then tell my folks I didn't die in 'em. You know 'em—back East . . . Nice and respectable. I'd hate to have 'em know I was shot—by a girl holdup!"

The men downstairs were dashing around outside to head off the raider. Some time had been lost in bumping confusion and through the switching off of the lights at the big lever. The holdup had more than sixty seconds start. A dozen had caught a glimpse of a slight figure upstairs, in skirts and wide brimmed hat, pretty boots and yellow gauntlets, darting past with a smoking gun in one hand and a dirty canvas bag in the other.

But when the hunters, who dashed outside, circled around and sought to head the bandit off, they found no one. A group went up one alley, another circled around the block, a third man ran down the street; and, in ten minutes, more than a hundred men were circling and dashing around on the lookout.

Somewhere in burrows or passageways, over a roof or through a hallway, the escape was safely made—at least for the present. The city marshal, two or three deputy sheriffs, scores of volunteers kept up the search; but the quarry had made a clean getaway.

CHAPTER

A SHERIFF'S GRIM DUTY

WHEN Dr. Evans was dressing the disfiguring wound of Wakeful Sam Lucern, a bystander began to talk.

"By gad, I'd know her any——"

"Shut up!" Lucern shouted. "You don't

know anything! If you think you do open yer head."

The proprietor had recovered his own weapons, except one of the small automatic pistols which search in the office had failed to reveal. The holdup had thrown Lucern's revolver behind the heavy typewriter desk, and the other pistol of the pair was found in the corridor. For once, the Tivle establishment's conveniences for a quick, obscure escape had been used against the owner. Moreover, it would take a lot of beautifying to restore even ordinary looks to what had been a face in which Lucern took pride.

City Marshal Searls heard about the shooting a few minutes after it happened. When he arrived at the amusement palace, he found a dead man stretched on the floor and Wakeful Sam Lucern with a wide, white bandage across the middle of his face.

"What happened, Wakeful?" Searls asked.

"Holdup. A cowgirl in skirts, boots, gauntlets, and mask raided us."

"Get much?"

"Better than fifteen thousand."

"My land!"

"Killed Dickers . . . Look what she did to me! Right through my nose—with a .45."

"One of the *girls* did it?" the marshal exclaimed, glancing around at the crowd in the open rotunda upstairs. The dance hall business had stopped short at the excitement.

"She came in by the outside back stairs. Caught me in front of the safe as I tucked away some spare cash. She stood me in the corner like a fool. When I turned, she smashed my nose . . . Dickers was waiting outside, and as he pulled, she shot upwards from the hip."

"He was guarding you?"

"He saw her come. Thought it was a friend, he said, as he passed out."

"What friend?"

Lucern shook his head.

"He didn't say."

The Saturday evening sports were broken up by the incident. The Raining Sands populace moved away homeward, having heard and discussed the matter. The dispersion was simultaneous as by a common impulse. Cowmen and other visitors from out of town worked away from the Tivle to where their horses were standing along tie rails. From down in the livery barn came the sound of tramping horses, uneasy in strange quarters, buckboards and and other vehicles along the walls indicating how some of the strangers in town would take their departure with loads of mine or ranch supplies.

The crowd had just nicely scattered, small groups and individuals going their respective ways, when, coming in from the big irrigation project with its new alfalfa squares, the quick, accustomed ears of the open country riders heard the sound of an approaching rider thumping on the baked clay of the hard road. An instant later several recognized the easy gait of the running animal, and passed the word around with excited ejaculations.

A little later they saw, coming under the outlying electric light, a rider whose spangles sparkled and whose animal covered the ground with a swift, enduring gait. The spectators who were in mid street hastily backed to the nearest side. From shadows and in backgrounds the ones who had just left the Tivle saw the daughter of the sheriff, Emma Dolind, going by, wearing a wide hat, divided skirts, gauntlets, a gray waist. But with a dark neckerchief knotted around her throat—rather than across her face!

She seemed to notice none of the spectators. She romped on by and turned to the northward. Those who dashed to the corner saw her throw the reins to the livery barn hostler and go on swift footsteps toward the big gray jail sparkling in the starlight in the way of new concrete structures which loom in the deserts.

No one made any comments. A distinct silence rested upon the tightly pressed lips of a hundred or so discreet men and their feminine companions. The homesteaders, irrigation farmers, cowmen, prospectors and what not took their departure without even a yell, or a whisper which the echoes might repeat. Miles out on the rolling desert, as they followed the trails to their abiding places, couples might venture to talk in tones a lurking wolf or owl could not detect at twenty yards. But where there were more than two, no one said a word. It never did any man any good to talk about a lady.

Thereafter, during the sunrise period and the brightness of the day, even garrulous old grannies among camp cooks and hard rock men in the mines, in cow outfits and portering for commercial emporiums went around with visibly swelling throats, just bursting to talk—yet afraid to say one word.

" 'Tain't none of my business!" City Marshal Searls declared, in a kind of whimpering exasperation. "Course, I heard some say . . . But what's a man going to do, when them as is most concerned won't talk atall, so's you can swear out a warrant, or sunthin'?"

NO ONE notified Sheriff Dolind till the following morning after nine o'clock. He came downtown and picked up the twice a week *Sun Foundry*. He saw an account of the holdup on the front page.

> An unknown bandit shot and killed Dan Dickers, while holding up the Tivle last night. The desperado also shot Wakeful Sam Lucern through the bridge of his nose, gashing both cheeks. The bandit got away with more than fifteen thousand dollars.

The sheriff read on till he had obtained the account of what was news to him. The coroner had been called, City Marshal Searls had been summoned, Deputy Sheriff Jim Cook had organized a thorough search for the holdup. Dolind read with increasing dismay the only description of the invader——

> According to the spectators, the holdup was dressed in a leathery skirt, with silver bangles and a studded belt around the waist. She wore a waist of dark material and had dusty laced riding boots and a gray felt hat with a wide brim. Her gauntlets were fringed and chrome gray, tanned. Around her face was tied a black or dark brown silk handkerchief. Her voice was throaty and penetrating, several hearing her tones through the walls of the office; or perhaps the door was ajar. She was swift, agile and sure, and her marksmanship was as deadly as it was prompt. When Lucern turned his head as she left the office, she made a bridge of his nose as she had warned, turning to throw a bullet upward from the lower ribs into the left shoulder of the unfortunate Dickers who had seen the visitor enter, but supposed it was one of the girls who sometimes visit the Tivle clandestinely, on errands of their own.

Dolind went to his office in the old dobe county court building. He was angry to think that nearly twelve hours should have elapsed without any one informing him of the murder and robbery. He stormed down on Jim Cook, who was red eyed with weariness and incessant searching. The coroner and the city marshal, too, had been up all night. The prosecuting attorney, Richard Curlew, was putting the statements of witnesses into affidavits. Even the adminstration's enemy, Deck Rankin, had heard the story and written it for the paper.

Sheriff Dolind seldom lost his temper, being more inclined to feeling sorry than angry. Now his urbane manner gave way to the hot indignation of a man who knew he hadn't been treated right, who felt that someone had taken advantage of his good nature. He talked right out loud, careless of who heard him. County Judge Pressley took him into the consultation chambers and, with embarrassed reluctance, said:

"My laws, Dolind, what else could the boys do!"

"What? What do you mean?"

"Don't you know . . . Is that right, Sheriff?"

"Isn't that what I'm kicking about, Judge?"

"Oh—ah—um!" Pressley wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "Why, we thought it was just a good bluff you were throwing——"

"You blamed scoundrel! Why'd I bluff?"

"A dozen saw her, Sheriff. Wakeful refused to make a complaint. Emma did it. What other girl could have shot like that?"

"Emma did it! My girl Emma did it?" Sheriff Dolind repeated, swallowing hard against the words. "You say Emma . . . Why—why——"

Dolind shook and swayed, his eyes bulging as they rolled in their sockets.

"Emma killed a man! Emma robbed the Tivle! Why—why—Judge!"

Pressley eased the stunned sheriff into a chair and sat down beside him, patting him on the shoulder.

"There, there," the judge exclaimed "The proof's lacking. Probably she was joking——"

"My Gawd! Murder for a joke!" the sheriff gasped. "That's no joke . . . I'm—I'm sheriff. I'm—I'm responsible. I swore to do my duty——"

"Now look here, don't! Not so loud!" Pressley urged, "Don't——"

Sheriff Dolind rose from his chair. He could hardly lift himself at the start, but as he came erect his haggard face hardened. His eyes narrowed. His jaws set.

"I swore to do my duty, Judge!" he declared, a low growl in his tone.

Judge Pressley backed away. He was himself a stickler for the letter of the law, yet gifted in the arrangement of that alphabetical phenomenon. He had sat in with Sheriff Dolind in many political and governmental conferences. He had found the old boy easy, good-humored, and on the level. They had compromised sensibly all along the line, easing up here and pressing down there, in the practical ways of politics. Yet rather better in the observance of their code of honor, their standards on a rather higher plane, than most of their constituents. They had shaded in favor of mistaken wrongdoers. Pressley faced now a man who refused to take advantage of power in his own behalf.

"I'm going after her myself," the sheriff declared, his voice hoarse with bitterness.

"You can't!" the Judge urged. "I tell you, there's no information! They won't testify——"

"Because she's my daughter!" Dolind brushed aside the technicality.

"You fool!" Pressley lost his temper. "She could sue you for false arrest. She'd hate you all the rest of your life."

The father wavered. He stood like a wounded bull, his head swaying from side to side. He could think clearly, coherently; and yet on that account he was obliged to restrain his determination to force the issue. Accusation against him had hurt more than he was willing to admit. The *Sun Foundry* had blistered him personally and attacked his organization individually and collectively. Perhaps the new county jail had been a mistake; but it wasn't crooked. He was going to give the board of assessors particular and general Hades for their folly in doubling the taxes of Deck Rankin, keeping the rate up even after the editor-publisher had been in town two years and longer. That wasn't according to precedent. It showed malice. And stupidity.

"All right, Judge," Dolind declared bruskly. "I have your word for it. Now I'll find out for myself."

WHEN Sheriff Dolind charged out of the consultation chambers in the old courthouse, one look at him confirmed the rumor that now he had been told what was under the holdup news. He looked thirty pounds lighter, six inches taller, and as grim as he had that day three years before when he performed his duty as prescribed by law, hanging the son of one of his old, but now broken, friends for double murder. There had been no saving the boy, who had been bad, mean, sneaking, thieving. He had needed hanging if any one ever did. At the same time the sheriff had taken the job to heart.

Dolind headed for the Tivle Dance Hall. He barked a demand to know the whereabouts of Lucern. The proprietor was home in his private dobe house up the street. The sheriff went to the house. He found the man sleepless from pain and worn by weariness.

"Lucern," Dolind demanded, "who robbed the Tivle?"

"I don't know," the gambler replied.

"You lie. Tell me about it."

The close set eyes of the man flared purple with anger, as though he would resent what he considered an insult; but after the first resentful shock at this accusation, Lucern's glare turned to one side. Dolind was good. And in this hot, hard mood it wasn't best to cross him. The sheriff had scant regard for personages.

"Speak up!" Dolind ordered. "If you don't, I'll take you downtown now on a charge of running a disorderly place. I want all you know. No more and no less."

Lucern twisted as the flooding blood wrenched the wound in his face, throbbing in the lacerated nerves and aching across the broken flesh.

"Sheriff," he said in a low voice, "honest to Gawd, I didn't see her face!"

"What did you see?"

The gambler told him. He gave the full account of what he had done.

"Dickers told you something as he died. What was it?"

"Who said——"

"The *Sun Foundry*. Speak up!"

"Why—why, Sheriff, he said he thought she was just coming to see me. That's all. Honest——"

"Thought who was——"

"Why Emma— My God! I mean the holdup!"

"Wakeful, you covered her up for me?"

"I thought it was a joke, Sheriff. It must of been an accident."

"She'd been there to see you?"

"No. Never. Dancing some—that's all. She's a good kid, all right. Wild, some, but on the level. I always liked her. But she had no use for me at all. Give me a call down with trimmings when I—made a mistake."

"What'd you cover it up for?"

"Why—I couldn't figure it out. I can't. I tell you, I thought it was a joke. Ye know, sometimes a joke runs out on a man."

"You'll have to testify to it, Lucern," Dolind declared.

"But she's your daughter, Sheriff!"

"That's it. I'm sheriff. She's gone the whole hog now——"

"It's murder. This holdup's a hanging crime. . . ."

Dolind nodded. He couldn't speak. But the man who had all his life been a cheat and a quite successful scalawag, with a sense of propriety which never bound him to any code of honor, saw in the official a terrible sense of responsibility, one that would sternly answer to the hardest of demands upon him.

Dolind had broken through the barriers of reticence at their strongest point. He went downtown and rounded up the other reluctant witnesses. He collared them, literally, and standing over them in the district attorney's office repeated the questions heretofore asked in vain, and so the wretched story was at last written down in legal form.

When the testimony was all obtained, even Lucern's name being attached to the affidavit to which he protested every other phrase, Sheriff Dolind broke down and cried. Everyone had recognized his daughter's hat, waist, skirt and even her boots; the petite figure; her voice, even—hard and shrill with tense excitement, feminine and determined. They recognized, especially, her .45 revolver.

"We gott-a do it!" Dolind repeated over and over again. "But—Jim, old boy. You sign the information, won't ye?"

"Me!" Deputy Sheriff Jim Cook wailed. "My gosh, Sheriff!"

"I'd better," the prosecuting attorney interrupted to save argument. "It's my duty, anyhow." Thus they saved the stricken sheriff *that*.

Hours had elapsed. The morning had seen the gathering of a throng who had heard, not only of a murder, but the additional rumor that this was no commonplace crime. Whisperings repeated the guesses as to what was taking place in the minds of the authorities. The crowd was prepared for almost anything. And, when Deputy Sheriff Jim Cook headed out of the county courthouse, cursing over his shoulder at the men who had ordered him forth to duty, all caught the undertone.

He strode across the plaza and headed up the slight grade to where the new county jail stood on the corner across from a big, bare waste plot of ground. The sheriff lived in that jail, upstairs. Moodily the deputy plowed along, his lengthy legs jack-knifing with regular rhythm. The little crowd of curiosity seekers grouped opposite as he went into the ornate entrance, through the unlocked, but heavily barred gateway, bound for the interior.

HE WAS out of sight nearly an hour. When he emerged, Emma Dolind was with him, a tiny figure of a girl, her head erect, her back stiff, her eyes set, frightened and blinking. She walked with little steps, evidently forcing herself to maintain her composure.

Among the spectators was Deck Rankin, who did most of his own reporting for the *Sun Foundry*, especially concerning the big news events of which the county had aplenty. He had learned in New York how to gather facts and how to express them clearly; moreover, he added to his patient efforts the knack of saying things so readers remembered them. He crossed the street to follow the deputy and his prisoner downtown.

When they came to the courthouse, Rankin went into the judge's office. There were gathered most of the county officials. Sheriff Dolind sat huddled in a squat armchair, hanging on to all that remained of his nerve force. Enough of the crowding populace were allowed to enter the room so that the proceedings were according to the letter of the law, public.

Judge Pressley swiftly carried on with the formalities.

"You are accused of murder and robbery," he said. "Anything you may say will be used against you. You are entitled to consult with an attorney at law. Do you wish to say anything?"

"Why, Judge!" her voice rose in high, shrill emphasis. "I haven't killed anybody. I haven't robbed anybody. I don't know a thing about it."

"I am obliged to hold you for the action of the grand jury," the judge declared in a sad, puzzled tone. "As the charge is murder, I cannot admit you to bail. I remand you into the custody of—of the sheriff."

Dolind staggered to his feet, nearly fell and then stumbled over to where his daughter stood facing the desk of the judge. Pressley signed the commitment papers which the county clerk had prepared and, having blotted them, handed the slips to the sheriff, but without looking at the face of his confrère. In fact, he turned his head away.

"Oh, daddy!" the girl turned, blinking, to find her father looking in another direction, trying with shaking hands to fold up the two filled in blanks.

She drew back from that unaccustomed demeanor. Her glance swept the faces of the onlookers to see in their expressions the cold and deliberate stare with which people regard those fallen under the mandate of the law. No one seemed to recognize her in that guise. The group was composed of men and several women with whom she was acquainted. They were as expressionless as strangers.

Her gaze at last came to rest on Deck Rankin. She stared at him even more puzzled than ever. He alone seemed to be familiar to her. Always he had abused her father, so that she passed him by looking straight ahead to ignore his presence, though more than once she had carried items to the newspaper for publication, and had met him here and there around town.

Now she approached him two or three steps.

"Please, please!" she spoke in a low, tense whisper. "What does it mean? When did I kill anybody? What did I steal?"

She heard several sniff distinctly, and turned to see sneering smiles on several lips, recognizing in the eyes of others the hard look of disbelief. They thought she was trying to squeeze out of another escapade. They believed she was acting, all this surprise, this fear, this cringing to the weight of overwhelming dread of circumstances.

"Jim! Jim!" she heard her father's low and agonized voice. "I—I can't—Jim! You do it!"

So Jim Cook took the papers and dragged his scraping feet around the sheriff to where the girl stood, tapping her on the arm from force of habit. She turned to look up into his face, as rough and blotchy as turtle hide now, but his eyes determined and keen.

She swayed, her head shaking, and then leaned against the deputy's arm to go outside where he requisitioned a buckboard to carry her to the new jail—it's second prisoner.

CHAPTER III

RANKIN'S BIG STORY

DECK RANKIN sat with his notes of the killing raid on the Tivle Dance Hall, considering the dènouement in the arrest of the sheriff's daughter, Emma Dolind, on the charge of committing the crimes of robbery and murder. He had been a first class metropolitan newspaper reporter until one day he blew up at the futility of the daily grind and the unimportance of his anonymity as a newspaper man in the big organization of New York news collection. He had left all that he might have become to wander a year and a day in North American byways, with the result that he had discovered Sun Pasture County, Raining Sands and another newspaper man, an editor-publisher, who was as anxious to leave the wide deserts as Rankin had been to escape Manhattan Island.

Accordingly, the lure of the news reporting caught the wanderer again. He took hold of the dusty old shop and was circulating in six counties before he knew it, subscribers making him independent. Now and again a wide hatted bully had come sauntering into the office to lay down the rules of the wide open spaces. Somehow, Rankin had evaded any serious difficulty; a genial smile and a ready wit baffled those who could not quite comprehend his high ideals and unflinching sense of duty.

Rankin had little sympathy for the local politicians. They had repeatedly tried to force him either to ignore what he knew was first class news to which the public was entitled, or they had tried, through various artifices of their kind, to beguile him into publication of what was decidedly untrue. He had been obliged to adopt the rule of receiving from three different sources every news feature within the scope of the Sun Pasture County political, and even public, affairs, because the spirit of local affairs was to think it funny to persuade a newspaper to print a lie.

Now Rankin recognized the sheriff's tremendous sacrifice on the altar of what he conceived to be his duty. Old Dolind was big, burly, one of the crowd and a typical politician of the wide desert country. He loved his daughter. His fellow officials had sought to protect him from even knowing that his daughter was suspected, had even been recognized without question, as a killing holdup. The official was instinctively a good police officer; and, when he felt the smothering blanket of evidence being held out, he had thrown off the network of obscurity and forced those who were most reluctant to see him hurt to reveal how far they had seen his daughter's wild pranks and reckless freedom carry her.

There was honor and greatness in the sheriff's bullheaded performance of his duty. His associates had found him easygoing, friendly and generally manageable. In party councils and the routine of official affairs he had given and taken, eased up here on a mortgage sale and overlooked there some trivial offense involving a cowboy on a toot. But horse thieves, cattle rustlers, desperadoes and outlaws—the criminals against whom the region's code of honor had drawn in self-defense a deadly, relentless edict . . . Well, when the clear cut issue had been raised, here was Sheriff Dolind, shaken with personal grief, forcing the issue against even his own pretty and careless daughter.

"He could do a lot to me—after that!" Rankin thought to himself as he marshaled the facts of his biggest human interest story, adding, "Lordy, if I could only write it!"

Surmising that he could easily outrun the opportunity, slopping over, he held himself to the bare recital of the facts: How Sheriff Dolind had found his associates holding something out on him, how he brushed aside their efforts to hide from his ken the tragedy in his own family. And then the editor told the way the spirit of public duty surged uppermost in the father's heart and soul, refusing to protect even his own daughter if she had committed a major, unforgivable crime of the county which had chosen him as its chief executive. And so, far and away better than he knew, Deck Rankin gave full sway to the facts and held his emotions in iron bonds of restraint. When his flash of the story went to the news association, the great dailies demanded a complete account, so Rankin put his own proofs on the wire. Raining Sands thereafter had its date line on the big news circuits.

RANKIN went to the new county jail. Deputy Jim Cook had removed Jerry Macon from the main corridor to the bull pen, a huge cage with steel floors, welded with crossbarred gratings through which even a boy could not squeeze. The girl prisoner was sitting in a small rocking chair, the sunshine from a large, grated window falling upon a little pile of socks and shirts. She was darning a hole in one of the woolens. Cook had let her go into her father's apartment upstairs and gather up these things which needed tending to. She did not notice the quiet approach of the reporter and deputy. Rankin watched two or three minutes, having checked the officer's impulse immediately to introduce him to the young woman.

He was a good reporter at his best. He saw that she worked swiftly, her long needle threading expertly over and under in those crossbars of yarn, not unlike the welded steel which confined her. She could not have been so swift and sure without much practice. Grimly, with desperate concentration, she kept her undivided attention on that task. Yet after a few minutes, she lifted her wrist quickly to her eyes, wiping them on the bend of the carpals. Her daddy had put her there. Still, she loved to serve him! She was struggling to retain her nerve. And then her figure grew tense and she looked up and around, discovering the men.

"It's Mister Rankin," Cook called to her. "He wants to talk with you."

She let her hands fall on her lap for

an instant, hesitating. She whitened around the faint artificial tinge of pink on her cheeks. Then she mustered her resources of calm and with a characteristic little huddling up she hopped to her feet and came, with her heels clicking lightly on the hard floor, to stand with a brave smile, her head cocked to one side to greet the man she so lately had scolded in his own den.

"Really," she shrugged her shoulders, "I'm sorry I can't invite you in. I'd like to—lots."

Rankin gasped, and both men burst into laughter. Her innuendo was overwhelming in its implication. She, too, laughed—but only bravely. In her eyes was tragic astonishment, fear of the inexplicable. Rankin had never before really given the girl any particular attention. He had regarded her as just young, unimportant, beyond his own realm and scope. He saw that she was older than he had realized—twenty-three or so. She was pretty, too, her eyes unconsciously direct and filled with the crystalline reflections of desert sapphire, as well as luster of intermingled pearl.

The trained reporter, so thoroughly accustomed to noting the shades and flashes of self-betrayal, marveled at her insouciance and sang-froid—while she seethed within. She was carrying a tremendous load. He wondered if it really was one of guilt?

Deputy Jim Cook threw open the inner gate. Emma turned to one of the score of cells to bring out another rocking chair like her own. Rankin instantly stepped to assist her, taking the seat away to place it near her own, with the pile of sewing to be done on another plain stool.

"You like to sew, don't you?" the visitor suggested.

"Only for da—for father," she replied, her voice low.

"You've done lots of it, though," he said. "I wonder if you don't make a good many of your own clothes?"

"Why—yes!" She stared at him, puzzled.

"The other day, you had an attractive waist, when you came to see me."

"Was anything about me attractive that day?" she asked.

"I liked you for sticking up for your father," he replied.

"Oh—he's good!" She choked. "You've no idea——"

"Oh yes I have," he replied.

She burst into sobs against which she struggled, at last successfully. She drew a tiny mirror and a little round box, lifted her chin, lowered her eyelids, dabbed away the marks of her tears and came back again magnificently impudent in her smile and gesture. Her courage tugged at Rankin's heart. Somewhat of a sentimentalist, he was obliged to make a fight of his own not to show the emotional admiration which caught him, brightening his eyes.

AS THEY sat there he felt a low, humming vibration, persistent, obscure and throbbing. The quivering sound bothered him, beginning to rasp his nerves as he looked around to trace its source. His glance discovered the origin. At the top of the two story corridor at the end of the building was ventilator fan four feet across at least, whirling around. In the monotony of the jail with its empty cells and its bare vacancies the sound waxed and waned.

"Doesn't that bother you?" he asked her.

"At night, when it's cooler, Jim turns it off," she replied. "If he didn't, I'd go crazy. I couldn't sleep a wink with that going."

"Would you like some books or magazines to read? I've quite a working library at home and in my office, both. You like to read—what?"

"Oh, everything. I'm always reading."

"Books?"

"Yes. I haven't many, though——"

"Where did you go to school?"

"I was born in Marietta, Ohio. You know, they had the first library west of the Appalachians in the Mississippi Basin. Marietta grew up a book town. The settlers were educated, so they gave the town an impress it never lost. My mother was a teacher and a beautiful woman. Oh, she was lovely!"

"I can believe that!"

"You mean that—from me?" she gasped.

"What else could I believe?" he evaded.

"When she died, it broke daddy. Oh, I couldn't stand it! We ran away . . . By and by we came here. You wouldn't understand."

"Sure?" he asked. "I was a pretty good reporter in New York City. Something happened. And I, too, came to the desert."

"Your—your wife died?"

"I never had a wife," he replied bruskly. And then gently, "But one time I wanted very much to have one. It doesn't matter——"

"Oh, but it does!" she gasped. "I'm sorry—really. It explains—I mean——"

"Explains?" he puzzled.

"Yes," she nodded. "Yes. The column of bitter *Blisters*."

He caught his breath. What was she doing here, accused of murder and highway robbery, diverting her sympathetic understanding to him? He blinked. He stared at her. She had really forgotten her own predicament as she went back to her own mother and then to the girl he most wanted to forget of all his branded memories.

"Emma," he exclaimed, "you didn't raid the Tivle!"

"Of course not!" she cried, under her breath.

"But how in the world—" He checked short.

"I know," she nodded. "I ran wolf wild. I couldn't help it. I had to do something—anything to fill my time. What was there for me to do?"

"Where'd you go Saturday night? Who were you with?"

"I rode alone."

"When'd you start?"

"Late candle light. I rode down across the new irrigation district——"

"Remember just where?"

"Why . . . I was dreaming, you know, loving the bright stars, hoping the new alfalfa fields' evaporation wouldn't dim their sparkling brilliance. I went to the Unsurveyed, crossed the valley and came up the east side."

"To the lower Unsurveyed?"

"Yes. Where the valley narrows into the Pinnacles."

"That's nearly forty miles around. What time did you come home?"

"Don't tell daddy. It was 'most daylight, when I climbed in."

"Climbed?"

She laughed lightly.

"Yes. I'll show you— Oh!"

She had forgotten she was locked up. She shut her eyes to hold back the tears.

"You mean you climbed up the outside into your room?"

"Yes," she told him. "Up the corner, along the blocks."

"I see. On the north side?"

"My room's on the northwest corner. Dad's is on the southwest corner of the building. The front's all ornamented with blocks and cast concrete scrolls. I talked them out of having just bare, blank walls in front. I wanted them pretty; so it wouldn't look so hateful and ugly for the poor devils."

"Didn't you meet anyone away down there?"

"No. I went the byway lanes, so I shouldn't find people."

"I've a map of the project. Would you mind going over the route you took so I can prove your alibi?"

"You—you'd help me, Mister Rankin, after the way I——"

"You don't suppose a newspaper man would allow a lot of politicians to convict an innocent woman, do you?"

"Scoundrel politicians. But—but, my daddy——"

"Didn't I tell you so?" he demanded, with mock ferocity.

"His heart is broken. You'd save his life if you could prove it," she gasped. "I didn't suppose it was any use."

"Just that academic Marietta unpractical education," he declared, banteringly.

"I'll be indebted to you for life!"

"I'll probably come around collecting the interest," he said lightly, rising to his feet. "You ought to have told what happened."

"I didn't know," she replied. "When Jim came with the warrant, I was asleep. They've all taken it for granted I was guilty. You know—my clothes."

"That's right. How did it happen? Were they your clothes?"

"Everybody said so. I've lots and lots of things."

"But your riding clothes?"

"I love to sew them, embroider them, emboss the leather with a mallet and stamps——"

"You made your belts and chaps and leather skirts!"

"Yes," she nodded. "I've tried out lots of designs and patterns."

"We've overlooked a big bet!" Rankin exclaimed. "You wont mind if I look over your things?"

"Oh—not mind!" she gasped. "A man going through my clothes!"

"You must let me," he urged. "You have quite a few riding skirts, boots and the rest that look pretty much alike?"

"Why, not so much." She shook her head. "You don't make two dresses alike, you know."

"Now what did you wear that night you rode down through the big project?"

"Why, my pearl gray waist, the smoke tan, calfskin chap skirt with blue and red Sioux beading."

"Boots?"

"They matched, of course. Soft calfskin, with top cuffs."

"Hat?"

"No. It was night, so I wore an army model calfskin. It's lined with red satin."

"Anything else?"

"Why—" She colored as she hesitated. "Orange silk bloomer-knickers."

"All right." He put away his notepaper. "I'll ask your father. Things aren't locked up?"

"Oh, no." And then, with a flashing smile she added, "Don't muss my things all up, please."

"I can't promise," he replied. "But I'll promise you one thing: I'm going to muss up the ideas of the whole blamed Sun Pasture County administration, sheriff's and all."

"And if you do, there's nothing in the world daddy wouldn't give you."

"No?" he stared at her, with the utmost gravity.

She bit her lip, clicked her teeth and then, with trembling chin, replied to his quick, confident nod of departure, as he rattled the big iron gate gong to summon Deputy Jim.

CHAPTER IV

CINCHING THE PROOFS

SHERIFF DOLIND went grimly about the performance of his daily routine tasks. He had recovered his equipoise and his face was set with sunken wrinkles, his lips compressed to a narrow line, and his eyes were gray and icy as they glittered through the narrowed lids when he responded to the greeting of Deck Rankin in the dobe courthouse office.

"Sheriff, you're on the wrong track about that Tivle raid," the newspaper man began.

"Yes?" Dolind lifted his upper lip angrily.

"The raid was just after eleven o'clock, wasn't it?"

"Just about."

"Your daughter rode down through the irrigation project to the southern Unsurveyed—about eighteen miles by the angles of the roads. She left here about eight o'clock——"

"I know."

"She came back toward four o'clock in the morning."

"Yes. She told something of the kind to Jim Cook."

"But, Sheriff—my God, man! You don't mean——"

"I reckon I know my duty, Rankin," the sheriff said bitterly. "You've been trying to tell it to me for years. You said the old jail was a coarse crook sieve. We've built the best jail in the Colorado Great Salt Lake Basin, and now you say we grafted on it. You can pound us, you can bullyrag us—because we're hog-tied and helpless. I've even got to sit here and listen to your idees and keep my hands off you, when you air your fool notions. About my family affairs, though, you keep your damned mouth shut. They're none of your business—outside the news interests and values you're always talking about. You've made yourself the judge of what the public wants to know; but remember that there's a limit to what a man has to take from a skunk editor, even though an official hasn't any recourse but to grin and bear maligning and insults."

Rankin stared at the father who had been tried almost beyond endurance. Emma Dolind had worried him, and now, as sheriff, he was paying the penalties of misunderstanding gay spirits and inexplicable carelessness of appearances. His love had conflicted with his manhood's ideals of public duty. One had to break; and it hadn't been his wish to perform service as an official of the Government. After the terrible conflict of emotion with honor, the father's reaction to his daughter's predicament had given way to the stern and uncompromising determination to see his duty through to the end, his anger against the one who had put him into this dilemma enabling him to perform the legal tasks.

"I tell you, Emma didn't do that murder and robbery," Rankin declared.

"Like hell she didn't!"

"Well, I'm going to prove it, Dolind," Rankin said, rising to his feet. "You won't stand in my way, will you?"

"Stand in the way of your proving my daughter innocent?" the sheriff repeated, his mind turning the curious proposition over for a moment. "No. But—well, it can't be done."

"I want to examine Emma's wardrobe."

"What?"

"Her clothes."

"What's the use!"

"It means the difference between conviction and acquittal."

"So she's blind-staggered you, now?" the old man sniffed.

Rankin saw that it was no use to meet the slurs.

"I just want to go through her riding clothes, Mister Dolind. I asked her about some of those things. I just want the truth, that's all. I've struck a trail. I was afraid she was guilty when I went to see her. I believed what she had intended to be a mere prank had run away from her. Will you let me go to her room and examine her clothes presses?"

"Yes, Rankin," Dolind replied, "go ahead. You can't do any harm, as I can see. You've done all you could to hurt me, anyhow."

"Look here—well, some other time I'll tell you a few."

So Rankin, with ill feelings, parted from the stern sheriff whose sense of duty was making him famous and unbalancing his judgment. When the reporter returned to the jail, Deputy Jim Cook, who was unwillingly serving as jailer, listened to the request to visit the girl's room. He went to ask Emma about it, and she said she had given Rankin permission.

"What's the idea, Rankin?" Cook demanded.

"Emma didn't do that raiding," the reporter replied.

"Old boy, if you could prove it—but, Hades, you can't! Why, everyone saw her!"

"No they didn't, Jim," Rankin replied. "They saw her skirt, her blouse waist, her boots, and her wide brimmed hat."

"*What!*"

"Come on, let's ride," Rankin suggested.

SO THE two men, the lanky, weathered, awkward deputy sheriff and the far more widely experienced and capable reporter, went up to the girl's room. They found it exactly as she had left it, the bed not yet made up and her riding suit laid out on the back and seat of a large leather rocking chair near the window. Her orange knickers were hung over one of the thick, pillowy arms. Sitting back in that chair its occupant could look through the north or west window far across the desert, and now as the two men glanced they saw to the north the mirage mountains of a vast and deceptive land.

The pale tan leathers of the pretty raiment were soft and fanciful, belts of gay beads and scrolls of burnt figures giving the two memorable pictures in their imaginations. Deputy Jim went to the head of the wide bed and drew a revolver from the holster dangling there. It was a beautiful weapon, with pearl handles, engraved silver frame and a long, slim, blued barrel. He broke it in two, tipped up the chamber to look at it, and as he did so, two empty shells fell from the ejector, the four other cartridges, all loaded, remaining in place.

"Now you've done it, Rankin!" the deputy sheriff turned on his fellow searcher. ".45's, two shots. One for Dickers and one making a culvert through Wakeful's filled in nose bridge."

Neither smiled. There was the weapon with which the holdup, the murder and the felonious assault had been committed.

"By gosh, Rankin!" Jim Cook turned angrily on the reporter whose nosing had developed this most convincing fact of all, the use of the girl's own revolver in the crimes. "By gosh, Rankin, yo' got to forget this! I'm goin' to clean it. Give her a chanct."

Rankin sat down. Jim sagged against the wall at the head of the bed. First rip, they had made the State's case against Emma Dolind invulnerable. Another trap of the Law's blind sets had closed unshakably upon her. Jim tucked the weapon back into the holster and began to curse with the fluent, unconscious mutterings and murmurings of a man thoroughly disgusted with everybody, reporters especially and himself in particular.

The newspaper man, with the memory of the young woman darning her implacable father's socks as she rocked in the prison cell chair, cringed as from bodily blows, writhing and shivering. Despite all his fine sense of honor, and in spite of his years accustomed to the tragedies of human error and wilfulness, he knew he could not go on the witness stand and tell the frantic truth he had uncovered. Emma Dolind was a pretty girl, gifted with the appearance of innocence.

"Oh, damn it to Hades!" he cried, and made odd, choking sounds of resentment.

"Doggone!" Jim snorted. "I know why they ain't no jury goin' to convict a purty woman."

"Dickers wasn't any good," Rankin declared. "Nothing but a gambling joint lookout."

"Wakeful never used his good looks for any decent idees," Jim added. "That face needed spoilin'."

Then both chuckled shortly, resenting their own soft-heartedness, finding excuses for a lively, wild young woman whose pranks had turned to tragedy.

"She had no business—" Jim declared angrily, ripping out into a main track of rounded oaths, glaring at the handsome weapon.

There had been a rodeo down at the railroad the previous autumn. Riders, ranchers, homesteaders, miners, shepherds of flocks, and all kinds of regional features had contributed to the contests and competitions of the week. Emma Dolind had come down with the others, riding for a second prize, and then shooting her way with her old solid frame .38-40 to the revolver championships at 10, 15, 25, 50 and 75 yard ranges. One of her trophies was that $125 revolver, and with it she had shot off a tie in the speed and all-angles tests, winning against Jim Cook himself, and rattling Wakeful Sam Lucern so badly that he came in seventh when normally he should have won by a margin of several points.

"She beat Wakeful for fun," Cook remarked. "An' then she busted him up for fair. He always was hanging around sheep-eying her, you know."

"She detested him."

"Yeh," Jim assented. "He was more scairt of what she'd do'n he was of havin' her sent up—squealing to Dolind!"

Thus the two grumbled, groaned, cursed and tried for Emma's sake to wriggle around into some legal excuse for her messing things up thataway.

"Anyhow, they won't never hang her for killing Dickers," Jim urged stoutly. "Why, dadblast it! Yo' couldn't execute a yeller dog fer killing a worthless scoundrel like him."

Rankin didn't know. He was numb, staring at that pale tan riding suit. Jim looked around till he saw a pencil on the girl's desk. He tore off a corner of his handkerchief as he headed for the stick. But when he glanced into the open drawer of the desk he saw a piece of cord. Then in a corner of the room he discovered a gun cabinet, containing rifles, shotguns and plenty of ammunition, firearm oils and greases and Emma's old .38-40 in its well worn but fanciful heavy duty sheath and wide cartridge belt.

JIM began methodically to clean the pretty prize revolver. He did a thorough job, going over all the filigree work, inside and out. Then he put two loaded shells into the cylinders to make six, and replaced the weapon.

"Rankin," he said as he turned to face the reporter, "I want to tell yo' one thing. You mean well, course, but that ain't no sign yo're going to testify to anything what yo' learnt here today. 'Tain't my business, an' I'm depity sher'f. So 'cordin', 'tain't none of your'n, not much, 'tain't. You get me straight on that, partner."

The reporter nodded.

"I might feel different about it, Jim," Rankin replied, "but when her own father went back on her, I couldn't figure that's an even break. If she'd had different bringing up . . . He should take the consequences of what she did, if she did——"

"*If* she did?" Jim repeated, staring. "Say, mister! When I'm tried fer shootin' yo' fer witnessin' contrary to the things you know, I sho' want yo' fer a juryman."

"Eh?" Rankin asked, as though awakening from a reverie.

"Yo' said *if* she did them murderings and things. You ain't got no doubts—not now, have you?"

"Jim," the reporter shook his head angrily, "she didn't do it. I know she didn't."

"Huh! E-yeoow! Yer goin' to be took as a juryman to sit on her," Jim declared enthusiastically. "I know I can fix it with the county clerk, for the drawing, an' the lawyers'll be okay. And if yo' plead occupational immunity from doin' yo' public duties, yo' better not let the sun set on yo' head another night."

The two shrank away from the contacts of that room. Cosmetics had given it an atmosphere; feminine love of colors had given it cheery hues. And yet, there were the hard facts of the two empty shells in Deputy Jim's pocket. Rankin stared at the discarded suit.

"Jim!" he exclaimed. "We can't quit, Jim! We only just begun to prove her innocence——"

"Don't! For the love o' cactus, don't!" Jim swore with angry fervency. "The next thing, you'll have her hung, plumb sartin!"

But Rankin surged back into the room from which unconsciously in his dismay he had been retreating, driven forth by the overwhelming conviction in the evidence of the twice fired revolver. He had not completed his search. He shrank from the possibilities of what further investigation might reveal. Still, he reflected, nothing could more completely cinch the truth than what he now knew.

He turned to the east wall of the room, where a door ajar showed the tile of the bathroom and another door suggested the clothes closet he had vowed to examine. He opened wide the door, and, there, in two crowded rows, hung the varied garments of a woman's wardrobe.

Rankin stepped back, dismayed by the mass of materials for examination. They were all just so, too, at first glance. He raised his hands to take hold of something, but hesitated what to seize first. And as he stood there, doubtfully, his senses suddenly became alert.

There was a difference, a jarring something in this clothes hoard. Jim Cook came across the room to stand gazing at the evidences of a young woman's variety of raiment. As he drew alongside, Rankin turned to look at him, for the deputy sheriff brought an aroma of burned nicotine in his breath and dried tobacco in his clothes. The reporter concentrated his attention on this odd surprise in his speculations.

Rankin discovered a certain orderliness in that close compacted array of clothes. He couldn't figure out the system of it, but there were layers of skirts and layers of waists, and a certain homogeneity of relationships, as though, he surmised, she had hung dresses to wear with jackets, waists with appropriate skirts, and the like. And at one point he saw an ill balanced hanger, tiptilted and put into place hastily, without much care.

"I wouldn't manhandle that dry goods store fer a farm," Jim declared. "My gosh, how does a woman do it? An' I bet Emma's plumb certain there ain't nothin' to wear if somethin' special come along——"

The deputy sheriff choked off. A special occasion was duly approaching: examinations, grand jury action, trial, and whatever. Rankin started to close the closet door, opened it again to scrutinize the dangling garments and then gently pressed the knob shut. Cook had not discovered anything. The two walked softly to the door to take their departure. They gazed back at the room for a minute. Then Rankin shut this door, too.

Deputy Jim burst into low and volleyed oaths. He had added perjury to his other sins. He was adding perjury, too, he was sure, to the sins of his companion. He promised, with reiterated indignation, to scatter the remains of Rankin up and down the landscape, and would jubilantly die for his crime, because any dadblimped, mis'rable scoundrel who added unnecessary evidence to testimony already only too convincing oughta die with untold suffering.

"Y'understand?" Jim demanded, hardly able to control his feelings.

"Jim, I'll tell you something," Rankin said. "I mean if you'll just let everybody know it."

"Yeh. What's 'at?"

"Emma Dolind didn't raid the Tivle."

"Oh, yo' dadblamed, forsaken, rat-tailed jack!" Jim exploded, slamming the jail's outer gates with a terrific clang in the newspaper man's face.

Rankin laughed and headed away down the street, on his way to the sheriff's courthouse office.

"Sheriff," he asked, "does your daughter smoke cigarets?"

"No!"

"Sure?"

"I never saw her."

"That won't do." Rankin shook his head and returned to the jail. Jim came in response to his ring.

"I want to ask Miss Dolind one question," he remarked.

"Going to use it against her?" the deputy demanded. "I'm goin' to warn her not to talk."

"Don't. Let her lawyer—say, Jim, who is her attorney?"

"They've sent to the capital for Linman, Burke and Henry."

"They'll do. Best in the State!"

WHEN the two came to the big cell corridor, the accused was lying in her cell on the cot, her face on her elbow. At the hail she answered listlessly. Jim, with instinctive politeness and recognition of Rankin's peculiar status of detective for the defense went out to the jail office, while the two talked through the gate grating.

"I want to ask an impertinent question," Rankin said.

"You've been in my room?"

"Yes."

"Find anything?"

"Decidedly more than one thing. I'm going to ask you something. I've an idea. When did you shoot the prize revolver last?"

"You mean the one on the bedpost?"

"Yes."

"Why, I don't remember. It's so pretty I never use it, you know. Those tip-ups are wonderfully well-machined, you know, but they don't stand rough usage like the old reliable solid frames. I practiced with the one in the cabinet."

"Always clean your gun after using it?"

"Of course! I never leave them dirty. Ruins a good barrel."

"Do you smoke?"

"Why—no! I have—but not lately. Oh, I guess it doesn't matter what I did, what I didn't do!"

Her tone of helpless and hopeless dejection ended in a dry little choke.

"You had no cigarets with you Saturday night?"

"No! I never liked tobacco—the smell of it!"

"Never used it for moths in your furs?"

"No. I had the closets lined with cedar and the drawers made of cedar," she declared, adding with a touch of malice, "It made the jail I'm in more expensive, you know."

"Please don't. I'm sorry," he begged. "They've stopped the ventilator fan?"

"It was just abrading my nerves till they ached," she said.

"Eh, Jim . . . You'll let me go to your room again?"

"I don't care what you do!" she turned listlessly away.

When the deputy sheriff heard Rankin wanted to go to the room upstairs he refused to accompany him.

"What you testify to I'll deny!" Jim warned as he turned over the key. Rankin went to the clothes closet. He sniffed along the rows of clothes.

He had grown accustomed to the array. His eyes noted the care with which the shoulders of garments had been draped over their hangers, and then he saw how distinctly one of the protrusions did not match the orderly precision with which all the others had been put away.

This was a dark riding habit with a bluish gray waist, and leather skirt chaps had been tucked into the tightly pressed lines of garments. He brought it out, and he saw how badly the shoulders of the waist had been hung over the wooden hanger. The skirt had been pulled through the spreader in any old way. A pair of boots fell to the floor, dust fluffing out of the wrinkles at the ankles.

The chaparejos skirt had a sewed in, protected belt and two small pockets below the line where a wide ammunition belt would come. Rankin, with some feelings of embarrassment, spread out the resilient mass of clothes, looking for stockings and knickers. There were none. He looked into the tops of the boots, feeling down to the toes. No stockings in them!

He sniffed at the blouse and wrinkled his nose. He had found the inspiration for his inquiry if Emma Dolind smoked. He had detected that foreign aroma. In the left hand pocket of the disordered skirt he found the crumpled container of a package of cigarets—with three of the bent paper sticks. They were Dixies, of which he had seen none anywhere in the West; and, in fact, none since he had left New York.

"How come?" he exclaimed, rubbing his hand across his brow. "That's something. What in the world does it mean? That's the answer."

He stared into the closet again, looking over the tops of the two poles on which the lines of clothes hung in that five-foot wide, spacious storage room. Back in the corner he saw a gray, wide brimmed hat. When he brought it out to look into it, he saw something. A single black hair less than two inches long!

"Why, good gracious!" he gasped. And then with a yell he summoned Jim, who came up the iron stairway from the lobby three steps at a jump.

"Jim, Jim! Look!" Rankin pointed. "Look at that!"

The deputy sheriff came and squinted at the new clue.

"I got black hair," he sniffed. "I've wore that hat myse'f."

CHAPTER V

FOOD HEADQUARTERS OPENS

THREE men and a woman arrived on the galloping four horse stage from the railroad spur over the range to the westward, alighting at Raining Sands to glance around with sharp little eyes set in hard, wedge shaped faces. The woman was slim and small, hardly more than ninety-five or a hundred pounds in weight—a mere girl to look at her from behind but distinctly older and grimmer than any girl should ever grow to be in the harsh extravagance of her cosmetics.

Four leather suitcases, one of which the woman handled with extreme gentleness, rested at the feet of the four as they surveyed this heart center of the famed Sun Pasture County. Evidently, they were accustomed to size up the places in which they arrived, for they noted the lead of the streets, into the compass points. They allowed their eyes to turn and their gaze to linger on the dobe courthouse in the plaza. They seemed interested in everything.

Presently the feminine member of the quartette nudged the fellow who looked so much like an animal of prey that he was called "Snapper" and spoke under her breath.

"Look't!"

All four turned to gaze covertly toward the northward, where up a street they saw the glistening gray front of the bright, new county jail, with its largeness of ornament and strikingly significant architecture. For a half minute the building held their attention, but with another nudge the woman diverted the attention of her companions to the Crystal Land Bank on the near corner opposite the Tivle Dance Hall. The financial institution had large front windows, walls of sheet metal stamped into the semblance of stone; it had been dusted over with coarse sand laid on some kind of cement to give it the appearance of substantial blocks of stone. But gales carrying crystals of quartz and cloudbursts of carbonic acid in rains had already washed away patches of the cheap imitation, and it stood now a curious witness to the foibles of human desire to appear to be something more than it was.

The four caught up their suitcases and headed across the plaza toward the Gemland Hotel. They lined up before the hotel ledger, over which smirked a shining haired, pointed mustached, grimacing personage of dapper aspirations. The woman picked up the pen, gazed at the tip with disgust and brought out her own fountain pen with which she wrote swiftly and in bold, accustomed script:

Mr. and Mrs. Arturo Romans, New York City
Gerald Wapman, " " "
Rupert Jasper, " " "

"Theatrical people?" the clerk of the hotel inquired, admiringly.

"Yes," Mrs. Romans replied, with level eyed gaze. "We put on a big show, but we're taking a vacation, ourselves."

"A beautiful country to rest in, from the fatigues of histrionic—ah—enterprises," the grinning clerk suggested. "Magnificent!"

"Grand!" the patron admitted. "Where do we wash and where do we eat?"

The clerk gulped and called the bellhop.

In the evening the four newcomers appeared at the Tivle, in which the disfigured proprietor glided about, his eyes surly and sharp, giving an atmosphere of unrest and gloom to the crowd. Lucern's angry dismay at his marred features rebuffed his best customers, who missed the genial air of welcome and good fellowship which they desired. And so, to the proprietor's loss of all his ready money in the holdup, was added the fact of a rapidly diminishing income. And, unable to explain this, he blamed and cursed his staff, from waiters and bartenders to the girls who danced on commission and the gamblers who represented the house at the wheels and tables. Wild Gertie, Handy Frank, several of the most popular of his attractions, took their time and departed.

Raining Sands changed from a lively, jubilant trading center into a morose, anxious, suspicious community, where those who went along the streets at night scurried and darted, and paused around corners to watch back along the walks to see if they were being followed. The tragic accusation against the sheriff's daughter affected the town with dread and depression; for Emma Dolind had been popular and had set a swift pace among the young people who had more or less followed her lead and lived according to her spirit.

MRS. ROMANS went on the floor, dancing with her husband. Wapman and Jasper went mixing around, taking here and there a man to drink. Then one of the house staff introduced Wapman to Staley Keeds, teller in the Crystal Land Bank, and a few minutes later Keeds was dancing with Mrs. Romans, talking with vivacity and rather flirtatious incaution. Keeds, dapper, soft eyed and rather resplendent looking, anxious to shine as something of a sporting man, was charmed by the woman who confessed that she just was fascinated by the West which she was seeing on a touring quest of amusement, novelty and experience. She was anxious, she said, to meet the heroic figures of the wild, open spaces.

Keeds assumed a considerable swagger, where heretofore he had been rather prancy and sniffy, and found himself rapidly presenting a figure of just what she said she had anticipated when she crossed the Mississippi. On her return to her husband, to stroll away to the hotel with Wapman and Jasper, she assured them that he was the juiciest sap she had ever had the bad necessity and good luck to run up against.

Jasper had also been fortunate. He had run through two or three strings of pool with City Marshal Searls, following up with a midnight snack at the Kennel Ovens Lunch, where, over the coffee, Searls had unbosomed himself of the woes of Raining Sands. Dickers had been killed, the handsome Wakeful Sam had a real bridge in his nose, and Emma Dolind, the pretty daughter of the sheriff, was in the new jail, its second prisoner.

"Who you bet's the first?" Jasper inquired.

"Eh—who?" the three demanded at his jeering, knowing tone.

"Yeh!" Romans exclaimed. "You mean the Black Weasel?"

"Who but!" Jasper grinned.

"But how long's the stretch?" Romans asked.

"Forty less one," Jasper chuckled. "Three weeks today."

"What for?"

"Vag."

"Aw—that right?" Mrs. Romans inquired. "What's his game?"

"Le's inspect the new jail and find out," Wapman suggested.

They circled around the blocks, strolling. From a deep shadow nearly opposite they looked over the front, whose windows and doors were unbarred, while the upstairs southwest corner ones were illuminated. They could see a burly figure rocking back and forth in front of one of these, a smooth shaven and huddled up man on whose left shoulder suspender shone a yellow shield. As they stared, a lanky, striding man came into the room and stood with his arms akimbo, his full lips working, his teeth showing and his head bobbing. After a half minute the newcomer came over and jerked the windows curtains down.

"Telling the sheriff he's a fool, setting in a light, an easy mark for anybody," Mrs. Romans whispered. "He's thinking about his girl."

"Looks good to me," Wapman declared. "Better work fast. See Weasel, though. Find out what in blazes he's in for. Soused, likely! Aw, don't he make ye sick?"

"Not me," the woman replied cheerfully. "He's there on purpose."

They withdrew along shadowy bypaths, Wapman and Jasper spreading out to circle around in alleys and along the streets, finding the dark ways which even starlight failed to illumine. In the morning they ate breakfast just before eight o'clock. When the bank opened at ten o'clock, Mrs. Romans was quite the first to approach the teller's window, to inquire about opening an account, presenting a draft of one thousand dollars on the Keyburn Savings Bank of Mandrive, Massachusetts.

"How long before you'll be able to verify this—normally?" she inquired.

"Why, Mrs. Romans, it'll be all right to draw against it immediately," Keeds was sure.

"We don't need any small change," she replied. "The boys are just set on staying here to look things over. There's only one lunch room, and just the Tivle restaurant. Mr. Romans was formerly outside manager for Delmonico's, and Wapman is the Russian-French chef. I was a professional hostess for a long time——"

"Impossible!" Keeds declared enthusiastically, for indeed she looked quite young this morning. She smiled with appreciative coyness.

JUST behind the bank, toward the north along the Dappled Plateau road, was a large, rectangular wooden building which had formerly been a restaurant; but the Tivle had run it out with free lunches. The old equipment was in it, dusty but hardly worn at all. Even the copper beverage tanks still shone untarnished. The Friday edition of the *Sun Foundry* carried a quarter page announcement of the grand opening of the Food Headquarters on Saturday evening.

The four newcomers were industrious and proficient. They served excellent coffee, fine meats, ample vegetables; the cooking was remarkable. The place was so crowded that Mrs. Romans, who was cashier, was obliged to rustle three waiters and an assistant for Wapman. They had not anticipated any such rush of business.

On Sunday their special game dinner, including desert vension, rushed them for nearly two hundred seventy-five cent meals. That night it was after eleven o'clock before the proprietors could close up.

"How the Hades we goin' to work, rushin' us like this?" Wapman growled, slumping into the easiest chair upstairs over the restaurant where living quarters had been provided by the terms of their lease with the bank which had been obliged to take over the restaurant on mortgage.

" 'Twon't last," Mrs. Romans declared. "We can go easy a while, anyhow. My gravy, I'm plumb wore out handling change!"

But even under normal weekday patronage the Food Headquarters kept the four busy from seven o'clock in the morning till late evening hours. They had been so occupied that it was Wednesday before Mrs. Romans found time to go over to the new jail. Instead of being a mere caller, however, she went after business. She struck Sheriff Dolind himself.

"We've just opened the Food Headquarters."

"I've eaten there. Fine place!" the sheriff nodded.

"We're hoping to specialize on carried out meals," she went on. "Figured we might make a dicker with you; plain wholesome food, so much a meal. Anybody in the jail who wants extras can have 'em."

Dolind shook his head. The jail had its own cook. Nobody in the jail would want extras, he was sure. Just a hobo—the restaurant's only chance.

"I don't pass up any bets, Sheriff," she said. "I'd like to see the bull pen bird, anyhow."

"All right. Jim'll let you in."

Deputy Jim didn't mind showing off his lone vagabond prisoner.

"Hey, Jerry!" he summoned the man from his hammock.

Macon came over the steel plates with surly and lowering gaze. When his glance fell on the keeper's companion he stopped short, staring.

"She wants to know if you'd like to send out for special eatin's," Jim explained. "I told her prob'ly not. She's just opened up the new restaurant Food Headquarters. Prob'ly noticed it in the paper."

"Yeh. I noticed. What you got to eat, lady?"

"Anything you want!"

"You took my money off me," Macon turned to Jim. "Six or seven wheels. You'll pay her?"

"Sure."

"I want a meat pie, baked, no vegetables in it, but just gravy. And a quart of brown gravy, on the side. You got a good line of eats, Jim, but I just want a pie for a change."

"Tha's all right," Jim replied. "Feller wants his own kind o' stuff, once in a while, nat'chly. Don't reckon the jail cook'll pisen you, bein' moderate thataway. She mout, course, if you ate reg'lar off these here new grub programs."

Accordingly, just after noon, a boy delivered a hot meat pie with a pail of gravy. It was delicious. And Macon tarried long over its lean meat, its smooth gravy and its elegant crust. There were other things in it, which the prisoner removed after Jim went to carry a tray of dinner to his other charge. And presently the boy removed the restaurant dishes, all bundled up in the asbestos, heat retaining basket carrier. He gave them to Mrs. Romans who put them under the cashier's desk, for the nonce; and when she had removed sundry papers from the lining of the carrying basket, she sent the things into the kitchen.

There was no explanation as to why Jerry Macon had allowed himself to get into this jam. He had done well in his lookout report. He could just as easily have hung around in the hotel and whiled away his time in the Tivle. Casual inquiry elicited the fact that Macon had hung along the curb, and when someone asked him sociably if it wasn't a pleasant day, he had retorted that it was a blamed good one to mind one's own business. This had led to recriminations, which do a stranger no good when his antagonist happens to be a city marshal or a deputy sheriff.

"He's one rich puddinghead!" Mrs. Romans assured her three companions. "But we sure are right where we wanted to be."

THE storage and supplies of the restaurant were under the building in a cellar. The space was hardly eight by twelve feet. This was not large enough, so in spare times, a partition was built across one end of the bare, caked walls, and from behind this Romans brought out buckets of earth to be hoisted on a dumbwaiter to the kitchen level and emptied into the garbage cans. Apparently he needed the exercise, for the restaurant was making good money. He not only labored at odd times during the day, but frequently at night, after the restaurant closed, he pursued his activities, not infrequently assisted by one or another of his staff fellows, even Wapman the chef assisting the economical practice. They hired help for dishwashing, for waiting, for kitchen chores, but not for digging out the enlargement in the cellar. For one thing, the digging was far from difficult. A tiny stream of water under pressure from a hose dissolved the salts in the sandy clay and they could bail up the muck with a sugar scoop.

Every few days Jerry Macon, the prisoner in the county jail, would squander some of his scanty funds on a special dish or two from the Food Headquarters. To him went more hidden curses and sneers than condolences. From him returned snarls and suggestions. He knew what he was about, he declared. As they would know if he had bad luck and they had a good turn.

"What's the Black Weasel mean by that?" Romans asked his fellow restaurateurs.

"What's the diff?" Mrs. Romans inquired, a hard bit of glitter in her eyes. "He always was a double-crossing grafter!"

"What's 'at?" Wapman demanded.

"Look't! He's sittin' pretty. Come we pull this'n and he'll come out to whack in on the loot, won't he? He takes no chanct, he does no work, an' we're ditchin' an' diggin', ain't we?"

"Yeh!" the others assented to the woman's shrewd suggestion.

"We'll fool 'im!" one adding angrily.

"Yeh. An' what'll he do if we double-cross him?" Jasper whined. "He's black, he's a weasel, an' he bites yer throat!"

And so, worried, angry, successful purveyors to the appetites of Raining Sands, the cunning yeggman band burrowed from their cellar till they were under the old-fashioned, hastily constructed vault of the rich Sun Pasture County bank, the only financial institution in the region. And with sly appearance of trepidation, Mrs Romans gave Staley Keeds the bank teller the flirtation of a lifetime.

"We *must* be careful!" she assured Keeds. "Arturo can be so violent when he's angry."

"That's all right," Keeds assured her. "All I care is if you're friendly. I'm so charmed——"

"I know I'm awful!" she declared nervously. "But you are *such* a man! I never met anyone like you before. You must have terrible responsibilities there in the bank—all that money. There must be ten thousand dollars, sometimes."

"Ten thousand!" he chuckled snortily. "We always have twenty-five thou' in cash. Got to, you know. Take it like next week, now, when we cash in ready for cattle transactions, and we'll have better than sixty thousand for that. And, don't say anything about it, but the Gullingade interests on Thursday are going to buy the Lowder prospect. Lowder's a queer old jigger, a real old-time prospector. He demands cash in hand, fifty thousand. We'll get it Tuesday morning. Special buckboard express through the Short Cañon trail. So all next week I'll be accounting for practically two hundred thousand dollars. But I can take care of it, all right."

Just to show their good nature toward the jailed patron, the Food Headquarters sent Jerry Macon a special apple pie for his Sunday dinner, nearly two inches thick, flavored with pure cinnamon, plenty of sugar, full of juice—and with a scathing note which told him of the special buckboard express through the Short Cañon trail to be deposited till Thursday right over the open vault trapdoor plate.

> *We're all set. Been inside the box. An nex week prob'ly less'n sixty grand, instead of two hundred.*

Romans, not his good spelling wife wrote the note. It was true. They had cut all the rivets in the vault floor, under one plate. All they needed was to help themselves—and go. But their chief was in jail!

CHAPTER VI

CLUES

EDITOR DECK RANKIN'S first impulse was to carry his cigaret evidence to the sheriff. Dolind curtly refused over the telephone to see him. Under a veil of anger the father was hiding his hurt. The rebuff caused Rankin to go around to all the places which sold cigars or tobacco in any form, asking for Dixie cigarets.

"That's the second time anybody's asked for them," Rosy Lou, in the Tivle cigar, candy and magazine stand, remarked.

"Who else?" Rankin inquired.

"Deputy Jim Cook."

"*What!*"

"Do you think I'm lying!" the pretty girl demanded indignantly.

"Oh, no. I'm just surprised that Jim smokes coffin nails."

Rankin went off to think by himself. He had struck a snag not without precedent when investigating the activities of clandestine crimes. There were feuds in political circles, not always open or suspected. Jim had found the two empty shells in Emma's prize revolver. He had assumed the air of protecting the girl by covering up the evidence; yet he had revealed that convincing and damning proof. And Jim Cook had been able at any time to go into the girl's room.

Somewhere, among Cook's associates, might be the holdup who had killed the gambling den guard, robbing Wakeful of the cash resources. The proprietor was fighting close, now, pinching down at the games. And for the first time since Rankin began printing in the town, the Tivle bills for menus, dodgers, advertising and other work were slow pay, and mounting on the books of the *Sun Foundry* jobbing.

With Deputy Jim for an ally it had been an easy matter to double-cross the blame for the raid onto the sheriff's daughter. Rankin was instantly aware of the changed aspect of affairs. After all, the whole case was really mysterious, with strange ramifications. He had assumed too quickly that the raider worked alone. A gang was scattering under the surface of the Raining Sands social fabric. He felt his cheeks warm to think how nicely, thoroughly and cunningly Deputy Sheriff Jim Cook had, while pretending to be Emma Dolind's friend, given Rankin overwhelming indications of her guilt. The chance of the Dixie cigaret clue might, or might not, be significant. That, too, could be diverted against the girl in any one of a dozen ways.

Rankin had been to the new Food Headquarters only once or twice. He generally lunched at the Tivle Lunch, or went home for his meals. He saw someone coming out of the new restaurant lighting a cigaret. He had, in his searching, missed this place. He entered and, as he passed the cigar case, he saw that one end of the sales counter was taken up with varieties of cigarets. And there was an open carton of Dixies, from which several packages had been removed! He ate lunch, and, when he paid his ticket, he turned to the cashier to question her about the Dixie cigaret. But as he looked at her sharp nose, scooping, pointed chin and the narrowness of her eyes as she turned to take his sixty cents, he restrained his impulse. He had recognized a metropolitan poise. And the waiter who had served him had spoken in the suave tones of a real restaurant staff man.

The newspaper man, whose skill in gathering facts and uniting them in a story had won him a place in the New York tradition, was now really alert. He had been taking things for granted. He had overlooked a hundred possibilities. He had not anticipated finding here, in this little cluster of a village, the complications and evasions of really clever criminals. He had, in fact, failed to eliminate a single man or woman in town. These four newcomers, industrious and successful from the first jump . . . Well, they handled Dixie cigarets, and the cashier had the tempered hardness of other women he had seen as a reporter. And she was flirting around with Teller Staley Keeds. This was, of course, a woman's prerogative, necessity or whimsy, as the case might be; but he knew by practiced observation as a professional spectator that she was not one to pass up an opportunity.

THAT evening Rankin went to the Food Headquarters for a milk toast. It was delicious; good for forty cents, at least, but it cost only a quarter. He went around to the Tivle and sat down to look the throng over from a new viewpoint—one of deep suspicion. He saw Lucern going around in his angry, slithering way, conscious of the bandage mask that covered his permanent disfigurement. He saw Deputy Jim come in for a drink—alone. Then Keeds, the bank teller, hurried in and retreated to one of the stalls. A few minutes later the not unattractive Food Headquarters cashier came walking in, stepping in the light, quick way of those who click the pavements of a metropolis with their heels. Her bearing was swagger, and yet there was a certain birdlike watchfulness in her glancing about.

Rankin found the atmosphere suffocating. He was hemmed in. He felt the resentment of some of the lesser politicians and there was a curt nod in the passing of those who objected to his frankness in his column of *Blisters*. He presently slipped out to stroll along the streets. Carbon arcs glared down at the plaza corners and along the crossed main trails which led north, east, south and west, with the court square, the Tivle, the bank and the big general store opposite one another at the junction. He went out into the outskirts. He circled around on a wagon road that meandered over the desert, and so he approached the big jail on the edge of town. He thought he saw a light in the window of Emma's room. Just a flash.

The next instant he saw it again, a faint glow within the room too steady for a match. He stopped short against the dissolving ruins of an old dobe house. The light disappeared. He could not see the south wall of the jail, and because the night was bright and clear, he did not dare go across the open lot to where he could watch both sides of the room, from the outside. The light vanished and though he watched a long time, nearly an hour, he did not see it again.

Then presently he saw Deputy Sheriff Cook coming up out of town. The grade was heavy for him, as he shambled, stumbling and swaying along. Happily, Rankin thought, Dolind was in his room with the curtains down, and the lights turned on. Cook was a good man, everyone said, but Rankin disliked the idea of a jailer being intoxicated, especially the one over Emma Dolind. The deputy went into his own bunkroom, downstairs, handy to the doorway, ready to let in any prisoner or answer any summons.

Rankin went back downtown and saw Keeds and his snuggling companion taking a walk of their own.

"Wonder how much she'll hook him for?" Rankin grinned to himself. He was amused by the idea, for Keeds delighted to show an ornery newspaper editor-publisher how much more important a bank teller was than a journalist. The reporter added, "It'll sure make a good story when she does her trimming."

He stopped in at the Tivle again on his way home. As he came in, Prong Lowder, the old desert rat prospector, came over to greet him.

"Howdy, Rankin," the whiskered, sparkling eyed miner said in his soft, low voice. "I'm selling my true fissure vein, fifty thousand dollars. Buyers signed the option, putting a thousand down to show their good faith. Cash is being shipped in, by express delivery Thursday. By hanging on I could have had more, but I want to feel some real money, after the years I've picked and shoveled."

"Fine, Prong. I'm glad of it. You've earned more'n you'll ever get. Hang onto it."

"I shall. I don't gamble, except prospecting. That got me. You're the first man I've told. The bank's handling it for me. But I asked for cash. I'm—well, kinda silly, you know. I wanted to see it, heft it in my hands. A thousand in tens is an awful wad! It's coming in hundreds."

"Not a word! Don't blame you for wanting to see the cash. Invest it in dividend bonds and preferred stocks."

"Yes, sir, Rankin. I've a list. I've good relatives back East. Brother of mine's a broker. He's kept me posted."

As in a dream the old prospector wandered around blinking at the stars, snuffling the stinging dry night wind, watching the mirage off to the north shift and change, one minute a city of sparkling lights and another the marching of dancing figures going west. Rankin went home to bed. It had been a day of revelations, beginning really to belong to the community of Raining Sands. Heretofore he had only touched the surface, not knowing there were depths. Now he was in the catacombs of human desert underworlds, seeing the complications of the race of mankind, who are never simple and never easy really to read.

RANKIN went to see Emma Dolind in the morning. He had dropped in daily. Despite the going to press that afternoon, he tarried an hour with the girl. She was glum, disconsolate and timid. She talked in a low voice about everything but her predicament. Casually, he asked her about the routine, and learned, for the first time, that somebody brought some special extra eats from the Food Headquarters for the vagabond over in the bull pen, of whom Rankin had not thought.

"I had a funny dream last night," she said. "I thought I awakened and went to stand in the doorway of my cell. You know, Jim doesn't lock that one. But it's horrible, when he slams the main grating shut! You hear the clang, the crash of metals, the ringing of the hard steel. Then for a long time there's the humming of vibrations running around and around, up and down through the bars and plates. I looked around but I couldn't see anything at first. Then a shadow went creeping along the corridor up there, like a black cougar. It went up the wall, climbing and edging along, out through the ventilator. Do you know," she laughed lightly, "when I went back to bed I kind of dozed along and began to wonder if I couldn't go climbing up the gratings and walls, and go out through the ventilator. Wouldn't it be dreadful if I escaped that way?"

"I'd like to see you escape any way you want to," he replied. "If you want me to, I'll help you—any time."

His tone was bantering, for he had the feeling she would face the music, no matter what happened. At the same time, now she had grown alert, cheered by the feeling of the loophole in her prison.

"I knew you would," she chuckled softly. "Well, would you mind taking a little walk with me this evening, say about eleven o'clock?"

"Would I!" he laughed, adding in a low tone. "You know, I haven't taken a walk with a girl in—oh, ages!"

"Shame on you!" she exclaimed. "Imagine you keeping all such talents and wit and wisdom to yourself, when—when some of us need you so much. Oh, Deck! In my misery, what haven't you meant to me! I couldn't stand it—but for you."

She leaned against him, her face in his shoulder, panting with sobs. Then she laughed her tears away as he assured her everything was sure to be all right. She kissed him like a bird snatching a seed, yet with something of abandon in her gesture.

"You see," she read his thought, "to be a prisoner I must be dreadfully bad. There's something about it grips you. If I'd done those things, I could not but realize the justice of it. But, honest, Deck, I wasn't bad. I just had to run around. What else did I have to do? Nothing! And what you've written about me in the paper, just exactly what it is all about, the papers, the testimony, the talk around—all the time, between the lines, you leave the gates wide open so the truth'll come riding home. Then everybody'll see—and understand. You'll forgive me ever saying you were mean—hitting people who couldn't hit back?"

"Well, they hit me first."

"Yes . . . Tonight, then?"

"Where?"

"Well—um-m—over by that old tumble-down dobe pack train station."

"Was that the original corral and cabins?"

"Didn't you know? It is! They say there's hidden treasure there. Maybe I'll be there."

"Don't fall and break your neck."

"I probably shan't," she whispered. "I've climbed all over this horrid old shack, you know."

So that night he skirted the edge of town to find she had really taken advantage of the spacious aisle through the ventilator between the blades of the fan. She had slipped along the cornice and dropped down the north wall right past her father's window, but he had gone out to serve jury notices on outlying ranches and was not to be home for two days. He had not once been to see her.

As Rankin caught her in his arms, he breathed the sweet fragrance of her favorite perfume, the Mountain Flower. It permeated her room. The alien odor of tobacco had attracted his attention, like a blotch on white paper. He noticed, but did not mention, that she had put on a woolen blouse, a brimmed gray felt hat and a dark, short walking skirt. Her heavy laced boots crunched in the small gravel and sand as they strolled out across the open desert. Ascending a knoll and sitting on a petrified stump, they gazed down into the county court of Raining Sands, with the vast irrigated land squares extending southward for miles and miles beyond—sheer desert astonished by ample supplies of water.

Off to the right, in the west, were the Fading Hope Mountains, with a deep gap pass to the northwest, and the sharp, deep notch known as the Short Cañon high against the sky in the southwest. In the keen night breeze, with the sky full of colored brilliance, what could be easier than being fond and talking the sweet wisdom which lovers understand? What matter if she was for the hour an escaped prisoner? And what more delighted boon than his captive heart?

"Now you are a filcher of treasures," she rebuked him mockingly. "Oh, if I were bad, still your theft would make me good, dear trusty."

"I know you're the sweetest girl to love there is in all the world," he assured her.

"Really? Have you then loved so many girls as that?"

"I loved one once," he brashly admitted. "Your affection heals the wound."

"Then you really trust me? You *know* I'm innocent?"

"Of course you are. I can almost prove it in court now."

"But they say I'm the only shooter in the country who could have cut an arch in Wakeful Sam's nose!"

"Lucern told me it was a left hand throw from the elbow. You're right-handed."

"Then you've been watching me—for evidence?" she demanded.

He wrapped his arms around her waist as she sat on his lap. He noticed for the first time that she wore a cartridge belt for a girdle, and when he rested his hand on the holster he recognized the feel of an embossed leather flap. With his forefinger he confirmed his surmise. She had on her prize revolver, one of her championship trophies. He kissed her to forget the taunting voice that mocked his trust, his second venture in loving, and all the faintly supporting theories which he was with great pains building up, trying to be sure she was as innocent as he wanted her to be.

He accompanied her back to the shadow of the jail and from a farewell embrace, she turned and went swiftly and diagonally up the ornate wall of the office and living quarters of the county jail. She entered her own room, remained five or six minutes. Then, with simian reaching and clambering, she quickly made the circuit around the cornice, and high above the 16-foot jail yard wall she swung hand over hand till she reached the ventilator shaft. There she squirmed through out of sight.

Rankin stared in amazement. No one had ever thought of the ventilator whirling fan blades as ever stopping. When running, the metal would have cut any prisoner in two, but at night the switch was thrown off and the hole in the wall was an invitation for any agile prisoner to make his getaway. Even the daring girl had used the opportunity thus presented. He headed away downtown, the fragrance of kisses on his lips and a fierce struggle in his mind, his heart all on one side and his experienced intelligence on the other.

"Well, anyhow," he grumbled to himself, "I can't begrudge myself the satisfaction of having been a blamed fool with a mighty attractive and interesting girl. Why, she can climb all over the place, anywhere!"

WHEN he had organized the day's work of the *Sun Foundry* for the day, he sauntered up to the county jail as usual. He found Deputy Jim suffering from a second day headache and Emma very quiet, indeed. She greeted him distantly and gravely. To his eager inquiry she returned a perfectly evasive answer.

"No," she replied. "There's nothing at all the matter."

"I didn't hurt you?"

"Oh, no."

"Won't you please tell me——"

"There's nothing to tell."

"There is!" he declared angrily. "I want to know."

"I tell you there's nothing at all," she said with emphasis.

"I'll be waiting for you tonight."

She looked at him as though wondering what he was talking about. He had long felt that he was a pretty wise reporter, broad, deep and competent, with his share, at least, of all around ability. But he didn't know a reaction when he saw it. In something of a panic he did the wrong thing, expressed the worst ideas and made the most disastrous comments. She allowed him to walk to the end of the big corridor alone; and before Deputy Jim had shaken the building with the clangor of the main gate's echoes, she had gone into her cell down at the other end, distinctly turning her back on him.

Then he was sorry he had said some of those things and also because he hadn't said others. He went to the office and wrote some *Blisters* for his column. He went over to the Tivle and collected his bills there, $197.69. He crossed over to the county courthouse, and gathered some good anti-administration rumors.

"If I was only a drinking man," he grumbled to himself as he headed for the Food Headquarters.

He ate a slab of red roast beef, with mashed potatoes and other trimmings and took two cups of coffee. Then, as the cashier smiled on him, her chin resting on the sag of her interlaced hands, he paused.

"You're the editor, aren't you?" she inquired.

"Oh, yes!"

"You know," she mused, rolling her large, if narrow set, eyes, "I always did wish I could write. I've met reporters—lots of 'em. Remember Dan Battisen?"

"Dan? You know Dan?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, yes. Friend of mine. Um-m—he wrote some pieces about me. I was in vaudeville, Proctor's, and we had a short run circuit. I made quite a hit. But you know girls! I married. . . ."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"So you knew Dan? Must have met Joe Larkey and Fenwood?"

"We had a party one night—Larkey and Dan. Lauraine Marsh——"

"Lauraine? You mean the girl the textile man, Carbrey, married?"

"Sure I do! Wasn't she lucky? Twelve grand alimony monthly and on the dot! Carbrey's a good sport, all right. Say, I want to talk with you. Tomorrow night? I got that case of Keeds on my hands tonight. My Gawd! Don't a jay get you, Rankin?"

"Yes. Where I laugh," he chuckled. "Tomorrow night. What time?"

"Call it nine thirty. 'Magine! That's later here'n it'd be at daybreak back home where we b'long, wouldn't it?"

He nodded cheerfully as he strolled away, feeling a good deal better. If that girl in jail thought she could treat him that way—huh! He went to the Tivle and stole in two or three dances with Mrs. Romans while Keeds glowered to think she had found an old New York friend in the editor who had only just lately managed to get his plant paid for. The night was wonderful. Tuesday always had been his lucky time. He rolled out of bed in the morning, stretched and was the first out for breakfast.

As Rankin sat before his morning's work, shortly after seven o'clock, he heard a horseman coming down the grade out of the westward. Just east of the plant the Short Cañon short cut trail came into the main roadway. Rankin looked over his shoulder and saw that the rider was bareback, with long reins coiled up in his hands. He was a good horseman. He flung himself off the animal after riding across the courthouse plaza.

"Something important," Rankin remarked, going up to get the news fresh.

"Yessir, she stuck us up!" he heard a continuation of a breathless recital to the sheriff. "Girl in a wide hat 'n' short skirt. Covered us, an', when Darnell made a motion to lift his sawed-off, she knocked him cold."

"Killed him?" Dolind asked sharply.

"Yeh. Got it through the lungs."

"Revolver?" Rankin asked. "Which hand?"

"Left hand. Nickel—fer I seen it shine," the man gasped. "Backed me over against the rock wall and grabbed the satchel. Fifty thousand cold!"

CHAPTER VII

ANOTHER KILLING

RANKIN rode out with Sheriff Dolind and his posse, the coroner and Prosecuting Attorney Curlew. With them went George Perland, the driver of the buckboard which was carrying $50,000 through the Short Cañon pass when the desperate holdup shot the messenger guard, Darnell, and made away with the five hundred $100 treasury certificates.

They found the victim lying on the ground beside the buckboard. Perland could come faster on horseback than driving the buckboard. Besides, he wanted to leave everything for the authorities to examine. The distance from Raining Sands was just over sixteen miles, and the robbery had occurred at the first false dawn.

The Westerners, familiar with the scenes of tragedy of the desert trails, stood back to survey the spectacle presented to their eyes. Less than seven hours before, murderous robbery had been done there. The heavy, hard voiced Perland told his story in detail.

"We'd had a good ride," he said, "and kinda eased up as we crossed the summit turnin' down the grade. We'd packed a lot of stuff thataway and never lost a dollar. Darnell looked along the dark wall an' up the broken slope on the north side the narrows. 'All right, George,' he said. 'Theh's Raining Sands!' Jes' like that! I was drivin' pretty rough down the rolling rock. We hit this bench an' both the horses snorted, throwin' up their heads. 'Cougar I bet,' Darnell said.

"I wa'n't so sure. That sorrel lifted his head with a jerk—dif'rent from a cat snuffle. But I was holdin' 'em. Darnell seen somethin', throwin' his sawed-off. But *whang!* The red fire of semi-smokeless, right alongside, between those halves of the big split boulder.

"'Up!' a shrill, mockin' lady's voice said.

"I had the reins around both fists. George lopped down, paralyzed. Yo' know what a standard .45 slug does to a man! His gun slid down—theh 'tis! I expected it, myself, but my arms was out straight holding the reins. She reached an' lifted the satchel—dark yellow grip, heavy leather it was—an' that was all the baggage on board. She shook it. I could hear the packages lumpin' around inside, rustling. If you've handled money yo'd know the sound.

"Then the horses threw themselves up, turned an' tangled theirselves. That danged girl give a laugh, cacklin' an' backed up. Next minute she was gone . . . Right in theh, Sher'f! I seen her shadow. I had quite a snarl on my hands, but calmed the team down, though they was over the traces headin' the wrong way to the buckboard. I staked 'em to that lone juniper theh an' went to Darnell. I raised him, lifted him like a baby to where he lies. He wa'n't but a sizable runt, anyhow, around a hundred an' forty.

"'That yo', George?' he asked. 'Kinda dark, old boy—gettin' darker. My sun's goin' down, George.'"

Shaken with emotion, the big driver fought with his feelings. He held them a minute, as he must have held the wild team of horses, and continued:

"We kinda talked along, him choking an' me wipin' the foam from his lips. I'd seen too many go to make any mistake. He wa'n't big, boys, jes' a little feller, but livin' he was all there. Dyin'—dyin', he didn't begrudge it. She didn't give him a show in the world. One of them new women, I expect. Theh was quiet. Away yonder come an echo, the running of a horse in the gravel, then hittin' hardpan, boomin'. Darnell kinda eased hisself, his breath kinda fluttered, an' he said:

"'All right, George, let's go.'

"An' so he went. Right theh where he lies now.

"I kinda puttered around a minute. One of the traces was broke. The buckboard was sprung around. I snapped the sorrel out the harness an' shaped over the reins an' come ridin'."

"Which way'd you say you heard the running, George?" Dolind asked in a hard voice.

"It come echoin' in the cañon here," the driver replied. "Course it was over north, though, on the back. She didn't go up this south red wall."

On foot, four of the posse spread up the slope among the huge, broken boulders. Rankin accompanied these, taking a lesson in the art of reading trails from the superb wildcrafters of the desert. The men went angling along, circling, stretching their necks, feeling the ground where they found tracks in the sand, leaning to get the sun's reflection on the places where there had been passing cattle, passing horses. And a yell took them to a soft place where someone with a small, narrow foot, flattish heels and a short stride, had stepped. A few yards beyond was where the horse had been tied to a low, gnarled juniper.

Here the men checked Rankin's too close approach while they examined the details. They noticed the horse had cribbed the rank cedar leaves, that a bent nail head was in one shoe, that the beast had rubbed dark brown hair on one jagged point, and that one of its tail hairs, twisted on a prong, was nearly black. Then the four men studied each other brassily, nodding and making odd, unrecognizable sounds as they audibly sorted out the things they had discovered, while Rankin waited patiently with the outside feeling of a bright man listening to savants discoursing in a learned tongue.

Presently they worked along the track by which the horseman had approached this place. The tracks were plain. Quarter of a mile away they found the juncture with the trail leading into Short Cañon pass.

"Yo' wouldn't think she'd be such a fool as that, would yo'?" one of the men, a red haired, hawk shouldered, freckled faced cowboy known as Speckles, exclaimed.

The others made no comment.

"Why in Hades didn't she circle out?" Speckles demanded. "Goin's jes' as good."

"'Fraid o' gettin' lost!" somebody grumbled sarcastically.

Then the disgusted desert men turned to stare down across the bottoms where a vast rectangle had been turned over and ditched along the boundaries and across the quarter section lines to make an irrigation project successful. And when they went to look where the murdering holdup had ridden, they found the tracks, as plain as could be, heading straight for Raining Sands, down the alluvial fan and across the sand and alkali.

WHEN they reported to the sheriff and prosecuting attorney, they found the buckboard harnessed up, the dead man roped to the planks and covered with a blanket. With two of the men on the seat, the others rode ahead, jogging along, a grim, funereal procession kicking up the dust back to the Sun Pasture county court.

"She had on a pale skirt. I see'd it flap," Perland added details. "She held her gun in her left hand and reached with her right to take the bag. I could smell the perfume an' cigarets, she was that clost; but I had a .45 gun muzzle ag'in my ribs... Le's see. Kinda feels sore. We'll look."

They looked, and there in the white, soft, clean skin of the man, on his left side, was the plain round mark of the revolver muzzle with a black and blue spot encircling the ring.

"She sure poked yo' good, George," Tucker remarked when the posse had all examined the spot. "I bet yo' grunted."

"I don't remember," Perland declared. "I was thinkin' of Darnell. I was thinkin' it was the first time we'd eveh been really trapped."

As they came to the tin can dump which always marks the approach to a desert community desirious of indicating its chief food supply, first one and then another of the possemen stiffened and looked to the northward. They could see, over near the old pack train station's dissolving dobe walls, a horse poking around, pawing the dust uneasily. Speckles, Tucker and Rankin rode over there a quarter of a mile. The animal was saddled and its reins were dangling. The hair was dark bay and the beast's tail was so dark it looked black.

"Would yo' believe a woman could be

such a danged fool, Tucker?" the reddish cowboy inquired in complete disgust.

Speckles caught the horse by the dangling bridle and led it down the street to the corner of the plaza, where they joined the posse heading for the undertaking establishment of the Sunshine Furniture Company. The others gave a stare at the saddle horse, but Dolind merely glanced at the beast, huddling up where he sat on the buckboard seat, gazing with hard moroseness at the wagon tongue ahead of him between the horses of the team. The gasping, exclamatory noises of the spectators thronging along the sidewalk ceased in the dead quiet of a stunned, disconsolate crowd.

Rankin cut across, circled and went back to the big gray jail. Jim Cook had been working around, cleaning and picking things up. Rankin told him a little of what he had seen, and asked:

"Let's go look at that blamed room again, will you Jim?"

"Sure," Jim nodded. "Jes' as though the noose wa'n't tight enough on her neck now!"

The pale, tawny buckskin skirt was thrown up on the hangers in the closet. The prize revolver was dangling over the head bedpost; one cylinder was empty, but the barrel had been wiped out.

"Yo' saw me clean it, Rankin?" Jim asked. "Look through."

In the glistening, clean surface were streaks and even three or four little black balls of smut. The rubbing out had been hastily done.

"My Gawd," Jim muttered mostly to himself. "She's crazy!"

"Just soon I'd go hear her rave, Jim?"

"Yo' must hate that girl, Rankin," Jim turned on him. "Yo' an' me've got so danged much perjury on our souls, now, 'at we oughta be hung, too."

"Jim—you'd cover *this* up for her?"

"Yeh. I'm cleanin' this gun, yo'll notice," Jim replied grimly. "Much obliged for givin' me fair warnin' it was needed."

"You'd protect her, Jim?"

"I've gone so far, I'm goin' the whole danged hog," the deputy sheriff declared with outraged sense of duty. "My Gawd, man, if she's hung I got to tie the knot! I got to spring the trap!"

Rankin stared at him. As long as he lived he would never forget the deputy sheriff's expression. Rankin dragged the pair of laced boots from under the hanging clothes in the closet. They were a dark tan and now were dusty with alkali—but more than dusty. Jim caught one of them up and examined the top of the foot. A round, dark muddy stain in a star point splash was on the toe. It had been rubbed a little in a stirrup but the blotch was unmistakable.

"Yeh," Jim sneered, drawing his big red handkerchief, "now I got to be a bootblack, ain't I?"

"Hold on, Jim," Rankin checked the wiping out of the new evidence. "Sit down. Don't, I tell you! Emma Dolind isn't the only slim little woman in town."

"What's 'at?"

"Built the way this danged jail is, anybody could climb into this window and plant this evidence. Don't you see that?" Rankin asked.

"Eh? But—shoot like her? Where's the woman—" Jim gulped. "Besides——"

"You've got her locked in. She couldn't possibly——"

"Locked in, hell!" Jim snarled. "That's jes' what I was going to say. Besides, she ain't! Did yo' eveh notice nothin'? I jes' rattled the key in the lock. I jes' slammed the gates. That's all. She ain't been locked in! Climb in that window? Naw! This jail's been open as the desert for her. I even hinted she should take to the mountangs. She pretended not to understand. Now yo' know what I know. Likely she thinks I didn't know I hadn't locked these danged nonpickable locks. First along, we had a devil of a time, workin' 'em. They're so special we couldn't open 'em ourselves; had to have the factory man come twict to show us how to work the bull cage levers."

Rankin laughed.

"Grin, yo' blamed blue shank lobo!" Jim snorted, his tongue rolling away in incoherent profanity.

Rankin went over to the south side of the girl's large room, threw up the window and looked at the ledge without.

"Come here, Jim," he beckoned. "According to this she's left an alibi for you."

Cook came to look. There, in the inevitable dust of the desert, were the scrapes and prints of dragging skirts and handfalls.

"She must think a lot of you—according to that," Rankin went on. "She didn't want anyone to suspect you of leaving everything wide open for her, so she made it look as though she didn't come through the gates and doors."

Jim nodded.

"She's bright, ain't she?" he accepted the irony for sincerity.

Rankin felt an inkling of suspicion beginning to gleam like a true sunbeam through the black mass of evidence. He had seen Emma Dolind go through the ventilator fan blades. She had given no hint that she knew her corridor main gate was never locked. He wondered if she knew it, if she had ever tried the fastenings?

He knew everyone in town by sight, at least. There were not a dozen mature women as small as Emma Dolind. He could dismiss most of these from his suspicions. He did not know many women in town who could shoot a revolver without shutting both eyes and looking over their shoulders. She had won prizes for deadly accuracy and swift draw marksmanship.

Feeling the way he did, he just couldn't bring himself to go in and interview her as usual that day. In his heart and soul he felt she must be innocent, but not in his mind. Besides, he was provoked to think she had treated him so tartly after having been so kind with her lips on the previous night. He had kept tryst with the prisoner, strolling over the desert by her side, holding her cuddling figure in his arms with the glowing, starlit world at their feet. And because he was vexed, he recalled his rendezvous with Mrs. Romans that evening.

HE WENT to his office to write the account of what had happened. The story was "big." He put five hundred words on the wire for the big time news circuits. Promptly he received a request for a complete account; so he just shoved his four thousand words in the proofs to the telegraph office, just as he had written it. He had, heretofore, protected Emma Dolind the best he could; but now her name was familiar in the Raining Sands holdup mystery. He brought in the discovery of the saddled and bridled horse, left near the dissolving dobe pack train station. He did not say that was within two hundred yards of the new jail in which the daughter of the sheriff was locked up. Neither did he say that all that afternoon of the fifty thousand dollar buckboard holdup murder most of the populace of Raining Sands went for a walk and circled around the new Sun Pasture County jail, staring at the high walls, at the shapely and ornamented front and sides, standing in front of the building to look up under the broad, wide entrance with its heavy gates.

No one said out loud that the sheriff's daughter had been allowed to slip away to do murder and robbery—again!—with her prison cell alibi. Yet the belief was whispered up and down that day. Fear lent wings to the flight of hate.

Rankin was alone in the *Sun Foundry* office, pawing over his written notes, trying to penetrate the obscurity veiling this clear cut, crystalline case, unable even to discover a drift of dust in the matter despite his confidence that he was not mistaken about the girl. Then Jim Cook came clumping along, his footsteps audible on the caked alkali pathway. He strode into the office with its one electric light turned on over the editor's mussy desk. Without a word Jim skipped an envelope, sealed, in front of Rankin and would have turned to leave, only the newspaper man checked him with a word.

"Wait!"

Opening the envelope Rankin read:

Dear Friend:

Why didn't you come today? Did you take seriously my mean treatment of you? Don't you know, after all, that my heart, all that I am or ever shall be, is yours? Please, please don't desert me in my misery! I beg of you. Tonight at the dark nook by the dobe walls. Oh, I do love you!

Emma

He froze at those tender, breaking words. Through them he felt the frantic, terrible anguish of a worried sweetheart. He started to flip the sheet of paper to Jim, but couldn't. It was too sacred, too beautiful, too intimate to show another.

"Jim," he stood up, glaring at the deputy sheriff, "did you tell her about the holdup—Darnell's killing?"

"Hell, no!" Jim snorted. "Twittin' her might make her nervous. She's asked two-three times about you—when you were comin'. I told her presently. Tonight I reckoned yo'd prob'ly forgot, been too busy, an' she kinda snuffled, just like she'd sorta melt my feelin's. An' she begged me to take that to yo'. I brung her the writin' paper."

"She's locked in, Jim?"

"You bet! If I can keep that gal out o' mischief I'm goin' to. Theh's a limit to this here prankin', yep."

Rankin cackled a distraught chuckle. He scratched four words on a sheet of paper:

I shall be there.

Then he sealed it in an envelope and handed it to Jim.

The deputy clumped on his way back to the jail. Rankin looked at his watch, saw that it was time to be going, and within twenty minutes was keeping tryst with Mrs. Romans, though with quite different feelings than those with which he had made the engagement.

She was tense, nervous, absent-minded. When he spoke to her she would turn and her white teeth would flash in the dark like a cat's. He felt the glance of her eyes like the sting of a needle dragging across his sensations.

"Feeling bad?" he inquired. "What's wrong?"

"You know about being double-crossed!" she said angrily. "How it makes you feel?"

Rankin nodded. He knew sorely how it made one feel.

There was venom in her spirit that night. She drew him skulking along the alleys and byways, by short cuts he had not known, around to the office of the *Sun Foundry*, which was all dark.

"Nobody here?" she demanded.

"No. It's shut up. Boys all home."

She took him to the door, where he had no recourse but to unlock it with his key. She paused a time in the shadow, looking around, listening. She went inside and watched at the windows a moment to see if there were living shadows along their trail.

Then without ceremony she thrust him into his big office chair and curled herself up in his lap, sputtering, hissing, cursing in low, crisp oaths as she fondly draped her arms around his neck. He knew that hot flow of melting, searing language. It made him feel homesick. She had learned to talk where cursing is a casual conversational mood, expressive of anger or of joy, the lingo of lovers and the warnings of enemies.

"You're the only scoundrel I can talk to," she sighed. "Ain't it purgatory, though? I just had to let go into somebody's ear. You don't mind? A lady has to do her squealing or she'll bust up and go crazy."

"What's the matter?" he inquired.

"That stickup!" she clicked her teeth.

"You didn't——"

"Course not!" she laughed shortly. "Fifty grand, that easy? Aw, ferget it! I've said too much already. This ain't fer publication, you know. I was just so mad I wanted to say it. Now I have. What ails you? I can't stay but a minute. Ouch! That's all right! Darn near broke me in two—that cinch. See? Ain't I the West, though! That *cinch?"*

She laughed. She wriggled deliciously. Flirting was as natural for her as for an apple blossom to blow perfume. She changed her mood in a flash, palavered him a minute, expressed her gratitude that he had let her talk—safely. Demanded to know the time and decided that she wasn't late enough. But a few minutes later she sprang from his lap to scurry on her way—to meet Keeds.

Rankin wondered how bad she really was. And then with a shock he realized that here was a gangster girl from the East who could have worn Emma Dolind's boots and clothes. He was sorry. Wild as she was, Mrs. Romans was attractive in her careless vivacity.

He dragged his feet to the other tryst in the gloom of the pack train station dobe walls, glum to see two such interesting women so deeply involved in the wretched desert crimes.

CHAPTER VIII

CAUGHT

DECK RANKIN waited in the gloomy shadow of the old dobe pack train station with feelings of exasperation and doubt. This wasn't newspaper work, either in motive or practice; he was being drawn more and more deeply into the actual affairs about which he was supposed to render fair and impartial reports to the readers who trusted what they read in the columns of such papers as the *Sun Foundry* and in the big circuit of periodicals which he represented in this territory.

He had arrived earlier than the trysting hour—eleven o'clock. Emma Dolind was a little late in arriving. She greeted him affectionately, saying she had gone to her room for a minute. He sat on a flat topped lump of fallen wall and she cuddled into his lap, all curled up.

"Deck," she whispered, "I waited all day long for you, and you didn't come. You didn't feel bad. Nothing happened?"

She was intense. He played for time to think. He thought she could not help but know of the holdup, the robbery of the fifty thousand dollars cash express shipment and the killing. At the same time her pleading tone contained no quaver of subtlety or trickery. Raining Sands was seething with the mystery of the holdup—a lone feminine figure, masked and as deadly as a serpent.

She felt or surmised his doubt, his evasion, and pressed him for an explanation.

"There's nothing. I was busy," he declared, but was as unsuccessful in beguiling her.

"What is it?" she demanded. "You're distant."

He wasn't. He had his arms around her. They were cheek to cheek. She was curled up on his lap, her knees drawn up. He had never been closer to her in his life. She read his distraught attention, penetrated his uneasy doubts and demanded an explanation with sweet anxiety. She had held him off the night but one before. Now he was, even against his own desire, unable to offer an explanation or relax his barriers.

"Don't you know what happened last night—early this morning?"

"Why—what did happen?"

If she was acting she was superb. He did not, could not bring himself to tell her. He passed the matter off, despite her insistent demand. He knew she wasn't putting on. He knew beyond all shadow of a doubt that she was innocent. Instantly she knew the passing of whatever had disturbed him, relaxing herself into calm and satisfaction. He told her of the holdup but did not describe the bandit. And presently she told him he was tired, had been working too hard, and that he must go home.

Accordingly, with reluctance, he accompanied her to the foot of the jail wall and watched her swiftly run up to the encircling handholds and go around to crawl through the fan of the ventilator back into the jail cell. When she had waved her hand he skulked slowly back downtown in the deep shadows. As he aproached the dark Food Headquarters, strolling slowly, he heard low, staccato, clipped voices—a manner and tone he had not heard since he left the East Side of Manhattan. He could not distinguish a word, but the sharpness—that stirred memories echoing. He stopped short.

Through the alley approached quiet figures. At the street corner stood two feminine figures, petite, erect, chic. Shrinking back into one of the frequent niches, Rankin stood watching. He was sure of them both: Mrs. Romans, the flirt, and Emma Dolind! Emma's wide brimmed hat, her skirt, her blouse, her very boots were rich in the particulars of which he had grown fond and suspicious, sure and miserable. All those things which happen to a man who, whatever his desire in the matter, falls willynilly in love.

Still he could not hear what they were saying—the low, slurring, clipped and sharp expressions. Then Mrs. Romans opened a cigaret case with a low click. Her companion took one of the papers, she took another, and then Mrs. Romans struck a match on the sole of her boot, cupping the flame for the other to light the smoke.

"She's masked—Emma's masked!" the observer noticed, and as the two went on across the street into the next alley to go in the dimmest way toward the jail, Rankin turned and scurried back as he had come. He thumbed the button of the jailer's night bell. Jim appeared within a minute, a revolver in hand, ready to accept any desperate charge.

"Call Emma!" the visitor demanded. "If she's there, start the ventilator fan. Hustle!"

Jim was no lackwit. He rushed back into the big corridor and from the gate hailed:

"Emma!"

"Yes?" a voice instantly replied.

Rankin wiped the sweat from his brow

at that familiar sound, and saw the girl standing in her white nightgown, wondering at an inquiry at such an hour. It was two in the morning.

"It's all right," Jim said. Then he hurried to the big jail switchboard and he pulled the handle down.

Rankin and Jim went over to the big bull pen, then, and the hammock of Jerry Macon, hobo, sagged empty in the big, open cage. They had no time to find which bars had been sawed off with the cutting edges of hair spring blades which had come from the Food Headquarters in the pies and breads and meats of which Macon had had his constant supply.

The two went up to the girl's room, where the deputy sheriff stood by the southside easternmost window, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. The reporter, with his own revolver ready by the grip, stood over at the electric light plug, with his thumb against the pearl marker.

WITHIN ten minutes a shadow darkened the window, lifting back the copper fly screen to crawl into the room through the open window. The black, skirted figure tossed a cigaret butt out into the open air, dropped the wide brimmed hat on the bed and lifted the gauze mask from over the head.

"Hands up!" Jim growled and the room filled with electric light.

With a double barreled shotgun muzzle prodding his spinal column, the prisoner, Jerry Macon, hesitated. Fight was utterly hopeless, however. His hands, small and white, went up above his head, and Jim deftly reached to pick the ornate prize revolver from its holster on the belt around the fellow's slim waist.

"Why—the Black Weasel!" gasped Deck Rankin. "How the devil——"

The beady eyes, the pointed snout, the overshadowed chisel chin, and the buldging brows under the low, sloping forehead—the old New York reporter would have remembered that ferocious countenance if only for the fellow's terrific record. He had just happened not to see the metropolitan gangster whose looks had been so bad as to make him a suspicious person in the estimation of the Raining Sands officials. He was wearing Emma Dolind's clothes and he reeked of Dixie cigarets.

Deputy Sheriff Jim ordered the fellow to take off the profaned feminine garments. Deck Rankin called Sheriff Dolind and brought him to the scene just as the wretched masquerader stepped out of the skirt, standing in the girl's embossed leather boots, into the tops of which he had tucked his own long trousers.

Dolind stared, puzzled and taken aback. He recognized the prisoner, caught the significance of the leveled shotgun and the immediate details.

"Was he getting away?" the sheriff asked.

"Nope," Jim replied. "Just coming home——"

"What!" Dolind shouted, his voice rising. "He'd been going in and out. My God, boys! She didn't—then she didn't. . . ."

Rankin and Jim seemed to be watching Macon with concentration, but when the wretch swerved to plunge through the window regardless of the high drop, a wipe of the shotgun barrel lifted him staggering, with his head cut open for three inches along the left side through the hair.

"Hold on!" Jim said in a grim voice. "We want you."

And then they put handcuffs on the prisoner and locked him up in one of the big corridor cells, after stripping him of every rag that might contain a steel edge. They found Lucern's missing derringer. In the big bull pen Jim and Rankin found the crisscross of five-by-four squares through which the scoundrel had made his way to the open ventilator shaft with its now whirring blades of sheet metal.

Sheriff Dolind had gone to his daughter's cell, sobbing. He had lost faith in the one most important person in all the world to him. Neither Jim nor Rankin wanted to see nor hear what would take place there—a curious let-down in a newspaper man's general code of practice.

After the sheriff had taken his daughter upstairs, Jim shaved the scalp of the wounded bandit, drew the lips of the cut on his head together with stitches and then plastered the injury over with tape. The fellow didn't even wince; he was thinking of other things.

"Where's the loot," Jim demanded.

"Find it!" the Black Weasel answered, snarling.

They left him with his two wrists handcuffed to the rings, which had, for that particular purpose, been placed in the cell for the violent, the dangerous and the desperate. Then the two went upstairs and joined the sheriff, who had put on a big bathrobe. The three sat in the girl's room, where she curled up in a big chair.

Rankin told them about the cigarets, the dozen or so other clues he had found. He told about the four at the Food Headquarters and of the Black Weasel, alias Jerry Macon, talking with Mrs. Romans.

"Something went wrong among them," Rankin declared. "She said she was double-crossed. What was it?"

"We'll pick them all up," Dolind declared. "Better do it tonight."

They talked that phase over. A raid on the mob of gunmen at night would be more dangerous than taking them all by surprise in the restaurant in the morning. They hardly knew what had taken place in the jail that night, the sheriff surmised. Now they knew who held up the Tivle, who robbed Lucern, who killed Dickers and who had held up the express special shipment, killing Darnell.

For hours they talked, and when the sun came up, Rankin left the contrite, happy sheriff with his jubilant, brilliant eyed daughter to go downtown. Jim Rankin went along to find the city marshal and pick up a posse with whom to round up the four pals of the killer desperado. The Food Headquarters usually opened around seven o'clock. Just before eight Jim drifted around to the place. He found it locked. The other members of the posse raiders immediately came hurrying to surround the place. They broke down the front door, rushed back to the stairway and up to the living rooms. They were empty, and everything in disorder.

"Jim," Rankin exclaimed, "I'm a blamed fool! So are you. I told you Mrs. Romans was coming up the back way with the Black Weasel. She stood outside there and watched us catch him."

"Well, by gabbersnabber!" Jim cried, with comical self-disgust. "Come on, boys. Find out which way they went. I'll go to the stable and see what horses were taken."

WITHIN half an hour they knew the woman had gone to the livery corral to hire a team with a buckboard. A message, she said, had come notifying her her mother had just died. She had driven away alone, but the tracks showed she had tied the horses in the alley between the bank and the Food Headquarters, where they had trampled around uneasily. And here, as Jim circled, looking for the direction his quarry had gone, his foot went down, as if into a badger hole. For a minute the deputy stood gaping at the cave-in, and then Rankin leaned over to look more carefully.

"Better call the bank staff," Rankin suggested. "Their tunnel has caved in."

Two or three spectators ran to look into the bank's plate glass windows, but they could see nothing save the usual counters and vault front. The arrival of the teller, Staley Keeds, to open up found him perfectly debonair as usual.

"Sure, everything's all right," he declared, going to open the vault door.

There sat Gerald Wapman and Rupert Jasper, covered with dirt and in their overalls and undershirts.

"Wh—what——" Keeds began.

"Hello, boys," Jim Cook inquired cheerfully. "What happened?"

"Don't know." They shook their heads.

They had heard, or perhaps felt, the coming of a hurrying team of horses. It had stopped over the tunnel in the alley behind the bank. Then the hole began to crumble down, and fell in. Wapman had tried to paw out, but a fall had buried him, nearly suffocating him under three or four feet of crumbling, sandy clay earth. All they dared do was wait for release when the vault was opened. And they hadn't taken a dollar from the vault.

"That oughta count in our favor, hadn't it?" Jasper asked anxiously.

"Yeh." Jim nodded. "Instead of gi[illegible]eel you life, they'll make it only fifty[illegible] to a Robbin' banks is a poor busine[illegible]ridor floor. tion 'round here. So yer frien[illegible] to the Staley?"

The teller grimaced and gulped. The two Romans, Arturo and his wife, had six or eight hours start and ten or twelve highways to choose for their escape. They made a good choice, too. They vanished.

"How about the Tivle and the fifty thousand dollars loot?" Rankin demanded of the two tunneleers who had been caught in their own hole.

"The Black Weasel double-crossed us," Wapman declared angrily. "He always did hold out on us——"

"Shut up!" Jasper growled shrilly.

Rankin and the deputy sheriff went back to the jail. Father and daughter were still making up, still readjusting themselves to the fact of her innocence.

"More than sixty-five thousand is all that's missing," Rankin said, when Dolind had been informed of the capture of the bank raiders.

"We'll give Macon a chance to talk," Dolind suggested.

The pseudo hobo just sneered at the desert yaps who thought he would let go of his leverage of cash in dickering with the authorities for a light sentence. Frankly, he told them, he wasn't in a talking mood. In his story of the whole affair Rankin described the undergrown wretch's defiance and snarling pride in his crimes. Even hanging seemed to have no terrors for this criminal.

"I can pay for law talk," he said and laughed in the faces of the authorities. And sure enough, two days later Hon. Jason Bargone arrived to look into the case, having been retained, it appeared, by "wealthy relatives of the accused."

Bargone had never had a client hanged, and only old ones had ever died in prison, though he defended in these days only the most desperate of violators, with ample funds to pay for his services. He protested when he found his client in chains. He regarded with interest the network of steel which was being put over the ventilator fan shaft through the thick prison wall. He expressed the utmost confidence in his ability to prove that the so called Jerry Macon was a victim merely of extraordinary appearances.

revLeaning over the bar in the Tivle, talk-
the genially with the crowd, he expressed
"Why—[illegible]re in having such good liquor
Rankin "[illegible]emote locality. He listened to the gossip about what had taken place. Obviously he was mixing, getting acquainted, his shrewd little eyes measuring the jury material and estimating the regional frame of mind. Rankin came sauntering in to see the great attorney. Already the attorney had met him, knew much more about him than the reporter supposed the man could possibly remember. Back in New York Rankin had seen the lawyer in action and knew his surface and some of his subterranean methods.

"My good old friend, the greatest newspaper man who ever covered a murder case or exposed a criminal's record!" Bargone smiled mockingly. "I suppose you'll be witness against my client, eh?"

"Very likely," Rankin replied.

"Suppose I put you on the stand for us?"

Rankin looked at him. Behind that cool, hard eyed inquiry he felt the subtle menace of confused issues, tricked testimony, the exposure of his meetings with the girl who was supposed to be locked tightly in the new Sun Pasture County jail. Bargone was already informed of this. The wretched, undersized killer had laid out a cunning alibi, a possibility of defeating justice by taking advantage of the fact that the girl also used that ventilator fan exit from the supposedly tight cells. Bargone was just a little tipsy, just a trifle loose tongued.

"Better not," Rankin answered him and shrugged his shoulders, his tone a taunt.

"So you can protect your lady *friends*, eh?"

Rankin saw the point. Mrs. Romans had told the lawyer about their meeting, probably had gone to engage him on her passing by into oblivion. Bargone was going to use that subtle, undercover influence. He would use legal strategy to soften, to keep out testimony against his client. He could do that in some regions. He could get away with it against some kinds of witnesses, anywhere.

For answer Rankin sprang with the full force of his one hundred and eighty pounds of weight and drove his right fist into the stomach of the rather pursy attorney, who sagged with a loose hanging jaw and glazing eyes, falling forward into a straightening left hook followed by a smashing right. Three terrific blows; and the attorney slid down from against the bar into a kneeling, prostrate heap on the foot rail.

"He's trying to mix Emma Dolind in this case again," Rankin turned and told the startled and delighted spectators. "He's going to clear that dirty killer by throwing suspicion on her. I say she's had enough trouble from that scoundrel's crimes."

"You bet!" someone shouted. "Yer right!"

Rankin left the Tivle. He went home to his little dobe cabin and turned in to sleep. He had been in deep slumber, he could not tell how long, when someone caught him by the shoulder.

"Hey, Rankin! Wake up!" a voice cried. "A mob's hanging that killer—the Black Weasel."

CHAPTER IX

ON HATING JAILS

THE Raining Sands populace had the feeling it was standing more than it ought to from the wretches who had attacked its bank, murdered and robbed, and insulted the community as well as the region. When Rankin knocked the sneering, crafty criminal attorney senseless in the hot way of an impulsive Westerner, his explanation made it plain and won the complete approval of every listener.

"They'd all oughta be hung," someone suggested. "Them toughs!"

Ten minutes later somebody said:

"Let's go hang those black rascals!"

The suggestion was popular. Everyone agreed it would be a good thing. Someone remarked that it would save the tax payers a lot of money, too, swinging the Eastern crooks by their necks. The group in the Tivle surged out into the street, and magically the community was aroused. Men came scurrying down the streets, buttoning up their clothes or even dressing as they came.

They were milling around in the courthouse plaza. No one knew just exactly what to do. Suggestions were called back and forth. Somebody wanted to hang the lawyer first, to be on the safe side. Nobody had a rope for a while, and then three cowboys raised their lariats in the air and said they had 'em.

"Come on, boys!" a heavy voice ordered. "Right wheel, there. March!"

The three cowmen rode around the corner and headed up the street toward the new county jail at the north end of town. The throng stopped milling and straightened out into a kind of formation of lines, scores skipping and hopping, trying to catch step with the others. The street was narrow, and funneling into it, the mob's march straightened out into a long line of angry men, five or six hundred at least.

They didn't shout, they didn't sing, and even their talk lowered to the whisperings and breathings of determined, suppressed excitement.

"Keep still, boys. We'll go ahead an' git the keys," someone said, and the word was carried back down the line which began to mark time. Three men ran on ahead and they rang the doorbell. Deputy Sheriff Jim Cook came to the front barred gate, recognized two men with a third held by the collar, his hands apparently bound.

"Rewarded!" one said. "Wantche to keep 'im."

"A'right, Jack," Jim replied, slipping the catch. And as the iron grate opened, three revolvers prodded the deputy.

"We gotcha, Jim," one said. "It's a hanging. Them damned city toughs can't squander us around the way they has."

"But 'tain't legal!" Jim wailed, as the keys on their piece of broom handle and heavy iron ring were snatched from his hand.

"Tell 'em all right," one of the trio ordered. Another ran out on the front steps.

"Hurrah, boys! We got the keys," he yelled.

The mob heard the good luck in silence, and then growled their satisfaction, the rumbling mouthing of deadly and murderous intention. They came surging, jog-trotting up the gravel and sand of the street end and whipped around to crowd into the big hallway of concrete and metal, checked by the seven foot wide opening through the solid construction of steel fence.

Rapidly the throng pressed, scurrying from the entrance toward the second barrier, the great cell cage straight ahead. On one side, the right, a flight of steel stairs with a steel railing ascended to a platform ten feet above the corridor floor. This led up around the corner to the sheriff's living rooms upstairs.

A shrill, terrible shriek of terror came from the cells. The three prisoners heard the mob coming and understood what it intended to do. The cries of fear but made the mob growl the harder, beginning the nervous chant:

"We'll hang 'em! We'll hang 'em!"

The cry was taken up till it throbbed through the whole structure, booming, and the throng outside added their voices to the rising uproar. And then there was a crash that choked every sound in every throat, checked every man where he stood, and stopped every motion as their eyes glanced around, startled, to see who had fired that revolver shot.

Clad in pink laceries, thin and small, the bottom of her gown dragging all around her, they saw Emma Dolind, at the top of the first stairway, standing on the cold grating of the landing. In her right hand she had a revolver which everyone present recognized—the prize she had won for marksmanship. But it was the old blue barreled .38-40 weapon in her left hand which was smoking, after the shot she had fired to command attention. They heard, in the instant silence of that boom, the fall of the flattened lead slug where it thumped on the floor opposite her, having hit the wall high up.

"You men get out!" she ordered.

"We're going to hang those——"

The muzzle of the prettiest revolver in all the country, with two men killed and another one scarred for life in its record, dropped into perfect alignment with the angry eyes of Tom Dakin who had begun to tell what they were going to do. He froze and the words died in his throat. She was the best shot in the country—barring, perhaps, the Black Weasel whom they sought to hang.

"Nothing of the kind!" she retorted sharply. "You're going to hang nobody. Stand back from that lock, you. Leave the keys in it. Get back."

They obeyed.

"I'm here, Emmy," the voice of Jim Cook bellowed. "Shall I rake 'em?"

"Give them till I count ten to get out, Jim . . . One—two—three. . . ."

Those in the hallway dodged about uneasily, and then there was a rush toward the entrance through which the rest of the mob had stopped crowding, and from which in fact the nearest had already begun to back away.

". . . Four—five—six . . ." the girl's voice counted rapidly and clearly.

"My God, lemme out!" someone fairly screamed.

The man's yelp of fear carried the increasing conviction that never in the world could they all get out before the furious and eager young woman, the deadliest pistol shot in the country, was through counting ten. They jammed and burst outward like slugs through the muzzle of a full choke bore shotgun. Yells, cries, and gasps of effort drowned the sound of the girl's voice. Those who glanced back saw Sheriff Dolind arrive just behind his daughter with a repeating sawed-off shotgun in his two hands, also ready. She slowed her counting, and the last man to leave tripped, fell forward and slid out, crawling frantically.

THE deputy sheriff clanged the gates behind the last of the crowd. As he stepped back, a man sprang forward into the light—Rankin.

"All right, Jim?" the newcomer asked, "I just heard about it."

"All right, sure 'nough," the deputy nodded, jerking his thumb back over his shoulder.

There stood Emma, and behind her, a head taller, was Sheriff Dolind. Jim opened the gate to let the newspaper man come in, and, after shutting it, went over to pick up the flattened bullet which rested on the floor like a broken rivet.

"They were running when I met them," Rankin laughed. "But I was afraid something had happened."

"It had happened, all right," Jim declared. "She sure punctuated her talk with emphasis."

"And I've got to write all this story for tomorrow's paper. And add a page extra, at that."

"What were you thinking about when you faced them?" Rankin interviewed the sheriff's daughter.

"Why—" She bit her lip, embarassed. "I was barefooted and I was thinking if they didn't hurry up I'd catch my death of cold."

He caught her in his arms and kissed her. That's just exactly what she would be thinking, and he thanked her for it.

"I want you always to be thinking about taking care of my sweetheart," he declared. "Where do you guess that loot is, Emma?"

"Eh—you know!" She stared, her eyes bulging. "Why — I believe — I saw a woman. I thought it was a girl . . . Wait'll I put on my boots!"

She returned in no time, bringing a lantern from the office. Then she and Rankin together went in the dark of the night to the old dobe pack train station.

"I was out—alone!" she exclaimed. "I saw somebody riding up. I just thought of it. He came in here. I thought it was a girl meeting somebody—an awful, bold bad girl I was sure, you know. Who else would meet anyone out here in the middle of the night!"

He kissed her. Her voice was terribly sincere.

"I heard something while I was hiding," she declared, holding the lantern so that the light fell on the wall of the collapsing dobe building.

Over in the corner he saw a number of chunks piled up, and the flat side of one of these was dark, freshly crumbled off. Rankin pulled it over, and then pulled over five or six other chunks; and there was revealed the handle and part of the top of a satchel, with two dark stains on the leather. Under it was a cracker tin from the dump heaps and in this was stuffed the loot from the Tivle.

"There. I told you the place has traditions of buried treasure," she reminded Rankin.

"All right. Good," Rankin said grimly. "I'm going down and interview Bargone again. I'm going to tell him you showed me where it is."

"All right. I'll go with you," she replied.

And so they went down to the hotel to which the unconscious attorney had been carried. They turned the money over to City Marshal Searls to guard, and he in turn summoned Keeds of the bank and two deputy sheriffs. Bargone was just recovering his senses. He held his hands over his badly bruised stomach, rocking as he rubbed.

"How you feeling?" Rankin demanded.

"Go to——"

"Hold on," Rankin said. "I'm going to stay right here. I came to tell you that Miss Dolind, my fiancée, saw the Black Weasel hiding something out in the dobe pack train station ruins. We went there and we found the Tivle and the express messenger holdup loot. We'll let you stay in Raining Sands on one——"

"You say you found the swag?"

"Yes."

"I don't want to stay. I'm through. No justice in this——"

"Oh yes there is. And you'll stay," Rankin laughed mockingly. "I'm charging you with conspiracy to receive stolen goods, old boy. And everybody here heard your question. And your decision to depart when you learned the Black Weasel didn't have the swag any more."

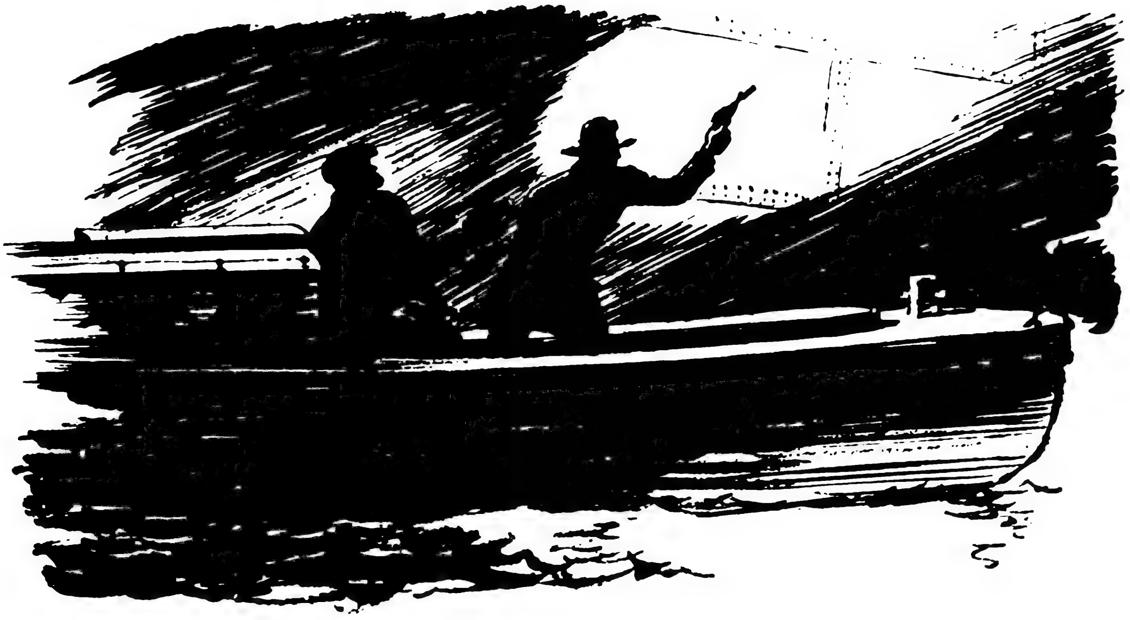
"What? Why, you can't—" Bargone gasped, and then groaned with pain, largely mental.

"Good, snappy work," Prosecuting Attorney Curlew said and laughed. He had come to see what was happening. "That'll hold him, all right. I'm afraid the sheriff's going to have another legal hanging job, though."

"The Black Weasel?" Rankin asked. Then he added, "If he's human he won't mind. I'll write the story of it—if we're back from our honeymoon!"

"Well, we won't be. Not if I have anything to say about it!" the bride-to-be declared, with asperity. "Oh, but I hate jails and punishments and crimes!"

A Little Scots Mate Fulfills His Trust



NOT KNEELING

By MILLARD WARD

THERE was nothing in the *Toro's* appearance to explain to Mr. McFarlane why the commissioner had smiled so cryptically in sending him down to her. Clear lined against a gray November sky, she seemed to be an ordinary, medium sized freighter, flush decked, black hulled, with white deckhouses. She was in good shape; but had just recently arrived from a long voyage and ought to be so. McFarlane climbed the varnished accommodation ladder and set his bag down on the deck amidships. There was no one in sight.

It was evident that the ship had recently finished taking on fuel oil, for the hose connections were black and sticky and a tub half full of oil, which had probably leaked from somewhere, had been left standing near the door of the fiddley. McFarlane turned briskly and entered the saloon house. He passed several closed doors in the passageway and looked into the saloon itself. Two men were sitting at the red clothed table, smoking and staring at each other grimly. Both were giants. One black haired, dull skinned, with thick neck and terrific shoulders, the other tall, even in proportion to his weight, beautifully made, with yellow hair and keen, light blue eyes. Tilted back on the dark man's head was a broken down uniform cap, the visor ringed with gold oak leaves.

He looked up suddenly and challenged McFarlane with every line of his face. McFarlane met this with an agreeable expression, brought out a long white envelope addressed to Captain James Hogan. *S. S. Toro*, and passed it over.

The captain read the letter swiftly.

"Third mate for me, eh? You belong to this port?"

"Yes, sir. But I haven't been running out of here the past year."

"I guess you're acquainted around here, though. That's something. I—" The captain's face wrinkled suddenly. "Say, mister, are you standing up straight? Not kneeling or anything?"

McFarlane stiffened and red crawled up his cheeks.

"I'll step back, sir, so ye can see for yerself."

The captain grinned restrainedly.

"Aye, you're straight enough now, but you're the shortest man that ever shipped with me. But to hell with that. Can you get me seven or eight men to sail tomorrow morning?"

"Have you tried the Sea Service Bureau, sir?" The third mate was still stiff.

"Aye. That and everything else. The old crew that paid off here—a crowd of sogers and cutthroats they were—have been spreading lies about the ship. But if you're known here, maybe you can get enough to sail with."

"Do you want all A. B.'s, sir?"

The captain exchanged half a smile with the tall blond man.

"Never worry about that, mister. Men, that's all. I got enough A. B. tickets of me own I picked up here and there to lend 'em to get by the law, and, once outside, Mister Herschel here will teach 'em seamanship."

Herschel smiled and spoke in a slow, sweet voice.

"Yess, mister, you bring me men, any kind, and in one month they will be A. B.'s or they will jump over the side. Yess."

McFarlane nodded pleasantly. It must be a joke.

"Sure. I can get you a crew; and if I get what I want, you won't have to teach 'em anything. Want me to go now, sir?"

"Yes. I'll turn the boy to on your room. I didn't know for sure if I was ever going to find a third mate here."

Toward the middle of the afternoon when McFarlane again approached the *Toro* from ashore, he understood at least partly why the commissioner had smiled. Not one man he knew would take a job in her or could suggest anyone who would. They laughed or, more friendly, warned him to quit himself while he was able. It appeared that in the year McFarlane had been away, the *Toro* and Bull Hogan had made a name for themselves along the water-front: an authentic hell ship.

"Dat Hogan, he iss a bull," one man had said, "but it iss de odder, de mate, Herschel—he iss de deffil. No. Not me. No more."

The captain and Mr. Herschel were still in the saloon when McFarlane came on board. A newspaper was spread out on the table between them and Captain Hogan was muttering angrily.

" . . . Everything in the paper. Hardly affect the market in San Francisco, but I didn't want it known. That one deal is all that's going to keep me from losing my share of the ship on this last voyage."

Again he saw McFarlane standing in the door.

"What luck, mister?"

"None, sir," replied the third mate slowly. "I did my best."

"Aye, and your best's none too damn good," Hogan snapped. "Well I needn't have expected more from you. We've got to shift ship before dark. Mister Herschel got two men while you were gone. They ain't much but we'll get a shore gang. We can't lay on here at the oil pier. Come up to the bridge in half an hour."

The captain and mate left the saloon together and McFarlane glanced down at the newspaper they left behind. It was folded open at an item about the *Toro.* He skimmed it hurriedly.

> Arrived from Black Sea ports . . . exciting voyage . . . general cargo . . . Half million dollars' worth of Russian sables for San Francisco in the strong room . . . attempted robbery in Odessa . . . fatalities.

The third mate straightened up, feeling cool and serious, and went to his quarters to change his clothes. The room was usual and comfortable enough, with a good sized rectangular mirror over the bureau. In this mirror he caught glimpses of himself as he undressed. He admitted that he was short, five feet two; but his skin was smooth and pink over hard, round muscles, equally developed in both arms and both shoulders. He moved with easy precision, unpacking his bag and putting on a worn blue serge uniform. His hair was almost as light as Herschel's but had no gold in it and his eyes were much deeper blue. Before the half hour had passed, he ran up the outside ladder to the wheelhouse.

HE FOUND Captain Hogan already on the bridge and a man standing by at the wheel. A tug was made fast alongside and several longshoremen, under Mr. Herschel, were singling up the forward lines. From his place by the engine room telegraph, McFarlane watched the helmsman curiously. He was a thick, powerful man, of average height, but his face did not look like that of a seaman. The skin was rough but not weather-beaten, and the brown eyes had no distance in them. His hands, resting on the wheel, were too well kept, the knotty fingers white and the nails unbroken. Either, McFarlane decided, he was not a seaman or he had just finished a hospital siege.

At that moment bells jingled musically in the tug alongside and Captain Hogan gave SLOW ASTERN.

The low concrete oil pier began to slip silently past and in a few minutes the end was abeam of the *Toro.*

"Starboard a little." The captain glanced into the pilot-house warningly.

The helmsman hesitated and then put the wheel over toward the starboard side of the ship.

"Other way. Other way." McFarlane motioned vehemently.

But Captain Hogan plunged in through the open door.

"Mister McFarlane, take the wheel," he roared.

The third mate sprang to the helmsman's grating, but as his hands went out, the man's shoulder unobtrusively took him in the chest and sent him staggering. He recovered his balance in time to see the captain lower his head and charge. The helmsman went crashing into the bulkhead and hung against it with knees buckling.

"Get to hell out o' this," Hogan told him. "Send your partner up."

McFarlane kept the wheel.

"Watch yerself, mister," the captain growled. "I can't be taking care of you all the time."

The lines of the third mate's jaw flashed into sharpness but he did not reply.

The other sailor came into the pilot-house a minute later. He was small and thin with a hard, narrow face and crooked mouth. His hands, too, as he took the wheel, showed white and uncalloused. The fingers were unnaturally long with tips stained dark by cigarets.

"What's your name, you?" the captain barked suddenly.

"Werner—sir." The man added the title as an afterthought, with almost writhing respect.

"What's yer partner's name?"

"I don't know, sir. He say call him, 'Joe'."

"All right. Watch yerself."

The *Toro* was well out in the harbor now, her bow turning slowly toward a disused railroad pier where she was to lie that night.

McFarlane was not too surprised when Werner made a mistake on the second command and Captain Hogan ran him out on the bridge by the collar, the two mouthing terribly at each other, to hurl him bodily down the ladder.

"You'll have to take her in, mister," the captain said, still choking with anger. "You can steer at least. Damn bums. Wharf rats. With their A. B. tickets! Might have known when they came down asking for jobs. Oh, what in hell is the sea coming to!"

The *Toro* was tied up in her new berth before dark, and the men who had worked the lines paid off. The quay was lonely and dilapidated, with rank, dead grass and weeds sprouting between rusty steel rails.

From the level of the rails there was a sheer drop of eight or nine feet to gray-brown water, but inshore of the *Toro* a ladder with several rungs missing was made fast to the concrete side. McFarlane used the last of the daylight in making himself familiar with the general lay-out of the ship, deckhouses, 'tween decks and holds, which he conceived to be the first concern of a new officer. The holds were empty and the hatches covered but not yet battened down. He located the strong room in the first 'tween deck of the Number Two hold and was impressed by its apparent impregnability. On the maindeck again, he noticed that the beginning glow of the city was several miles away. And the near-by shore looked peculiarly desolate.

AT SUPPER McFarlane learned that he was to take the watch that night; and, not long after, Mr. Herschel in going ashore clothes stopped at the head of the gangway to talk to him.

"I have put that Joe on watch tonight," the mate said. "And here is the master key in case you need anything. Everything will be all right, I think. There is nothing in the ship but in the strong room and it would take a safecracker to get in there. I go ashore. I think the captain, too. The last trip was long."

"How about the second mate, Mister

Herschel? I haven't seen anything of him."

The mate smiled again, his slow, sweet smile.

"He has not been on board for three days. He is very young and we were a month at sea, the last lap. The captain thought best to let him go. The assistant engineer will not bother you, either. It is his night to get drunk in his room. The oiler will stay below sober. Next watch they will shift around. You see? A good ship. Yess."

From the middle of the gangway Herschel looked back.

"Have you a gun, Mister McFarlane?"

"No, I never owned one."

"That is too bad. I would lend you mine but I always carry it ashore, because I might meet some old shipmates, you see."

Mr. Herschel had been gone some time when Captain Hogan came down from his quarters, wearing a blue overcoat with a black velvet collar and a derby hat. Darkness had fallen heavily under the persistent clouds but there was enough light from the low hung cluster at the head of the gangway to show the captain's face, broad and sullen.

He looked the third mate over with unexpected animosity.

"Ye think ye're making good in this ship, do ye, mister? This ain't like other ships with police always in call. This ship goes to places ye never heard the name of, where they don't know what a policeman is. I wasn't going to hold yer size against ye; but first ye promise me a crew and fall down and then ye let a wharf rat knock ye about. Do ye think ye'll do for an officer in this ship?"

McFarlane again felt rumpled inside, hot against the injustice, but something kept his jaws closed.

"When it comes to signing on," the captain grumbled viciously, "maybe we'll take ye as mess boy." And he went down the gangway into the darkness of the quay.

McFarlane stared after him for several minutes without moving. Anger could not quite overcome his desperate need of the job, desperate after months on the beach in another city. Then he turned and looked over the ship's deserted deck. It was a good looking ship; a tranquil, comfortable looking ship. McFarlane laughed.

The seaman, Joe, came slouching out of the port alleyway of the deckhouse and stood not far away. McFarlane was surprised that he had not quit after the incident in the wheelhouse. Possibly he needed his job, too. Presently McFarlane realized, because of some small movement, hardly more than a shifting of weight, that under Joe's furtive slouch lay a deep alertness. The man's shoulder muscles showed thick and knotted through his tight blue coat and he was holding a three cell flashlight in one hand. There might be the makings of a sailor in him after all.

McFarlane turned away from the rail. Night watch for an officer meant merely being on board.

"Well, keep an eye on things, Joe. I'm goin' in and read. You can hang out in the galley if it gets cold."

THE NIGHT was already chilly, and in his room McFarlane closed both port-holes, leaving the door barely ajar. He was not sleepy, but he was anxious to get his mind off Captain Hogan; so he stretched out on the wide, leather cushioned settee with a pipe and magazine. He read for a long time, the air in the room growing thicker and thicker with smoke from his crumbled plug tobacco.

Outside, stillness. Ten o'clock had passed before he realized that he was not so much growing drowsy as becoming stupefied. He rose, yawning, and opened his starboard port-hole. Seeing the smooth river of tobacco smoke that flowed out through it, he turned to open the after port as well. When he swung back the heavy glass, the thick green curtains fell together behind his head showing him the offshore side of the main deck with sudden clearness.

It appeared to be in perfect order, without any list, but deserted. If McFarlane's eyes had not been searching at that moment, he would not have seen three flashes of light from the after deck. The light itself was hidden by the deckhouse, but something happened three times to the darkness. Without being able to stir up any real alarm, he found his coat and uniform cap and went on deck. Halfway along the offshore rail, he met Joe coming forward. The watchman halted suddenly.

"Anything wrong?" McFarlane inquired.

"Naw. Thought my flashlight was on

the bum but it's good now. See?"

He raised his hand and sent a strong, dusty shaft of light straight up into the air, holding it for several seconds.

McFarlane made a deliberate round of the ship, finding everything as it should be. He stopped again at the head of the gangway. All anger was gone now, but the pleasant impression the *Toro* had made upon him remained. He remembered the sense of a line from Joseph Conrad: "Ships are all right; it's the men in them." It was true. The *Toro* was strong, clean, obedient; ready to carry the goods of men in safety, from one end of the earth to the other. Only men could betray her.

At the end of half an hour Joe went off on a private tour of the deck. When he came back, McFarlane decided he himself would turn in. He was sleepy now.

He drew himself together as Joe approached the inshore rail, but the watchman's hard voice held him.

"Couple o' them lines back there is slack. Could yuh gimme a hand to heave in on 'em?"

McFarlane's mind carried a clear picture of the stern lines half an hour before. They had not been slack then and the tide had not been falling. Any movement of the ship would have been upward. He frowned slightly and started aft.

"Sure. Let's take a look."

The inshore stern line and the quarter spring were hanging almost in bights.

"Slack all right."

Joe was already at the steam winch. He pulled the reversing lever first by mistake but started it on the next try.

"Get 'er warmed up," he said loudly above the clatter.

He left the winch running and pulled out his flashlight. He seemed to have trouble with the switch for the light went out twice before it burned steadily.

Perhaps twenty minutes of unhurried work for the two men to the rumbling music of the capstan set the lines taut again. McFarlane himself shut off the steam.

"What's the idea o' runnin' it so much?" he grumbled. "Might be somebody tryin' to sleep."

Joe grinned in sideways fashion and looked at him without speaking. McFarlane was not certain whether the insolence was intended for him or for life in general. But as they went forward together, he was thinking carefully. Why had Joe been doing tricks with his flashlight, and why, particularly, had he slacked away those lines?

AMIDSHIPS Joe kept close beside McFarlane, his nearness emphasizing the difference of height and weight between them. What could he be up to? The only place McFarlane had not been recently was forward. He remembered with an incredulous jolt that the strong room was forward in the first 'tween deck.

Turning he found Joe directly between him and the forward passage beside the saloon house. The man must have moved fast. McFarlane looked at him expressionlessly and moved to one side.

Joe followed the movement grinning.

"Want me to get you something up there?"

"No, I'm goin' for'ard myself. Get out of the way."

Joe did not move. McFarlane was not thinking of his size. He was the ship's authority. As for Captain Hogan's furs—to hell with Captain Hogan and his furs! It was the ship that was not to be trifled with. He took one step and caught Joe by the neck and shoulder, with the idea of hurling him aside. Joe did not hurl as well as he had hoped, merely grunting and staggering slightly. They faced each other, breathing heavily.

"Look out now," McFarlane said. "Look out."

He watched the blow gathering in Joe's face before the impulse moved a muscle. When it came, it was a wide swing, telegraphed but desperately hard. Blocking it hurt, but McFarlane knew at once that Joe was no fist fighter. There was nothing in his mind but relief at the end of tension. Still he hesitated.

"Cut that out, I tell you. You'll get in trouble."

As Joe grunted and set himself again, thought stopped and McFarlane drove both hands viciously. The blows cut the man's face but did not stop the punch. McFarlane went reeling back three yards as it glanced into his ribs. Closing, he smashed Joe's cheeks and mouth again. He knew his hands were bleeding. He went back a step on his toes and landed three light lefts to the darkened mouth. Joe snarled wordlessly, shaking his head, and came straight in.

McFarlane kept away successfully until a side step brought him forward of Joe. Then he was driven back against the bridge ladder. Blood in his mouth was at the same time salt and sweet. That or something else made him sick at the stomach.

"Damn yuh!" he gasped. "Damn yuh!"

His lips went back from his teeth and he swung his fists with short, wicked chops. Joe groaned in peculiar, impersonal protest, and came on with his body's weight. For the first time a blow reached McFarlane's jaw fairly.

There was a sulphurous taste, sharper than blood, on his tongue and the jarring of blows and the rays of the gangway light ran together into a continuous wavering that was neither light nor sound. Joe's face stood out clearly. It was distorted now and cut—yes, on a cheek bone flesh was hanging down.

McFarlane saw that he had not been hitting correctly. The realization was a flash of peculiar bitterness. He didn't want to cut the man, he wanted to put him away. He drew himself together unexpectedly and caromed off the ladder, head down, his body twisting as the muscles of shoulder and side drove his fists in short, accurate hooks. Joe went back clear to the inshore bulwarks, his ferocity gone with nearly pathetic suddenness. Now he was trying to cover up. McFarlane battered his body methodically, waiting for a shot at his chin.

Joe yelled, a hoarse, breathless burst of sound, and his right hand went down and back. McFarlane saw the blackjack an instant before it fell, as thin and wicked as a snake's head in the dim light. He threw himself aside, following up a terrific left hook and the blackjack landed on his right shoulder, dropping the arm limp and sensationless. But his left fist struck with a clean shock just behind Joe's ear.

There was no interval, it seemed, of the man's falling. He had been on his feet; now he was utterly flat. McFarlane twitched the blackjack out of his hand and stepped back, breathing hard. It was almost funny.

Then the rush came from both directions; two men running aft beside the saloon house with guns in their hands, another coming forward through the alleyway of the after house. The open door of the fiddley at his back was all that was left. McFarlane whirled and plunged through.

The door on the other side was open, too, so he crossed the grating of steel rods like a rabbit and came out on the other side of the ship. A bullet whipped solidly into the bulkhead behind him, but the report was no louder than the snapping of a cap pistol. Then there was a clatter of feet inside the fiddley. The three were bunched in pursuit.

McFarlane sprinted aft through the starboard alleyway. Breathing was difficult and his limp arm made him run unsteadily. He swung sharply around the after end of the house, not intending to be cornered in the stern of the ship, and went forward again through the port alleyway. The three were gaining; at any stretch they might begin shooting in earnest.

AT THE forward end of the alleyway, on the narrow open deck amidships, McFarlane caught brief sight of the tub of fuel oil still standing against the fiddley bulkhead, just clear of the alleyway entrance. He dived into the dark corner and overturned the tub with his good arm. The gangway light, outside and below the bulwarks, cast no light on the deck plates and the oil spread invisibly over smooth steel. The first slap of running feet and the violent pile-up seemed simultaneous. The three hit the oil together and went headlong. The leader dived squarely into an iron covered steampipe on deck, laying himself out, and for the others, McFarlane lashed twice with wicked precision with his blackjack.

Two ringbolts set a fair distance apart caught his eyes and he swung away into the saloon house. When he returned a few seconds later he carried several pairs of handcuffs from the well-supplied drawer under the chief mate's bunk.

The four men on deck were still quite peaceful and made no objection to being hauled about. McFarlane fastened one of Joe's wrists in handcuffs, passed the other end of the irons through a ringbolt and snapped them on another man's wrist, thus anchoring the two together and in place at the same time. He treated the other pair in the same way and then deprived all four of an amazing assortment of tools and weapons, which he tossed on the floor inside the galley. His right arm was still numb, but he satisfied himself that nothing was broken.

McFarlane remembered a door that opened into the first 'tween deck from the fiddley ladder, and being curious to see what the four had been up to, he chose that as the easiest way of getting below. The fiddley was completely dark, but once in the 'tween deck, he saw forward the bright wavering outglow of a light, which was hidden by a corner of the strong room.

The third mate hesitated briefly, wishing he had saved himself a gun from the casually treated pile in the galley, but the blackjack still dangled on its thong from his good wrist and he did not wish to waste time. He went forward quietly and looked around the corner. The small sailor, Werner, in goggles and heavy gloves, was hunched forward, playing the flame of an acetylene torch on the strong room door in a skillful and experienced manner. So there were five yeggs instead of four! An automatic pistol lay on deck within reach of Werner's hand. McFarlane was not conscious of making any sound, but the man looked up fairly at him and snatched at the pistol. Left no choice, the mate sprang, and the blackjack came down before the gun could come up.

After noticing with some interest that the hatch overhead was partly open, McFarlane extinguished the torch and put the automatic in a hip pocket. Then with some difficulty due to his bad arm, he slung Werner over his shoulder and carried him up to the deck amidships, where he anchored him with his friends. Cleaning up the ship, McFarlane was beginning to think, was an elastic sort of job. He tossed Werner's gun on the pile in the galley with a definite sigh of relief. He didn't like firearms and would have preferred not to have any around.

The prisoners had not yet begun to stir. McFarlane leaned against the galley doorframe, breathing more quietly. His face stung cleanly in the chill air and his legs felt steady.

He had no difficulty now in understanding why Joe had wanted him off the deck amidships, but the flashlight tricks were still unexplained. If Joe had been signaling to his gang, hidden on shore, why had he showed the light at the offshore rail?

McFarlane crossed once more through the fiddley and looked down at the water alongside. It was black, with a suggestion of oiliness, but rumpled by a breeze straight in from the harbor. There was nothing unusual in sight. The quiet and the gentle sound of the ripples seemed pleasant after the half hour just past, and he walked forward slowly, along the broad, deserted deck, almost to the bow. As he stood with his back to the offshore rail, a scraping sound, broken by soft bumps, fought against relaxation. It was faint enough to be a drifting log alongside, but in repetition it was peculiarly annoying. McFarlane turned impatiently.

From the rail he looked down into thick darkness, but there was something blacker than darkness. As he craned farther out, the shadow shaped itself into the stern of a big power boat, held by a trailing line so close against the *Toro's* bow that most of the hull had been hidden by the flare of the plates. At the same time a flashlight glared in his eyes from the open cockpit, and he heard the crack of two guns, fired together, but again curiously flat and low. One bullet ricocheted from the rail at his waist, but he had no news of the other.

As he threw himself down and back, he stumbled fairly over the valve of the compressor that held the starboard anchor in the hawsepipe. A reach of one foot told him that the Devil's Claw, cast off when the *Toro* was shifting about the harbor, had not been replaced, and with memory of the bullet against the narrow rail across his stomach, McFarlane felt the lash of anger for the second time that night. From the position of the launch's stern, the anchor would be directly above her bow.

The iron of the compressor valve was cold and smooth in his left hand. His body curved more and more. The valve was stuck. The engine of the boat alongside coughed, but fluttered and died. It coughed again. McFarlane brought his body lower, stretched out his arm along the rim of the wheel, a long loose purchase for leverage; then strain—black, red and black again. With the lurch of the valve's giving, a wave of physical pleasure passed through him, as complete and keen as any he had ever known.

One yell pierced the roar of the chain as the anchor plunged. Then came a great dull sound that yet had a thread of shrillness in it. The calves of McFarlane's legs were jerking and there was the freezing touch of perspiration on his forehead. He had trouble in locking the chain again.

FROM the rail he stared at the huge rusty links leading down into the water. They looked startlingly unnatural so close to shore, but the boat was gone. For a moment he thought, with no definite sensation, that the men were gone, too.

But there was splashing beyond the *Toro's* bow and soon he picked up the broken water about two heads moving toward shore. As he turned aft, his foot caught in a line near the rail, a line which yielded with heavy, live reluctance. Another glance downward showed him a pilot ladder dangling over the bow. A man was climbing the ladder energetically, with a gun between his teeth. McFarlane gasped and dropped to his knees. Having only one hand, he fumbled so at the knot that the man's head was almost level with the deck before it let go. The swish and splash that followed, however, were loud and satisfying.

The blackjack still dangled from McFarlane's wrist and, not forgetting the bullet against his stomach, he ran aft toward the gangway.

On the quay's edge as he went quietly along, he could hear the river pirates splashing and sputtering in the cold water below as they searched for the ladder he had noticed made fast to the concrete.

McFarlane found it before they did and squatted at the head, waiting patiently in the darkness. The splashing presently stopped beneath him and he heard a gasping grunt of relief. He stood up silently and waited until the first man had pulled himself half over the edge of the quay before he applied the blackjack. Then he shifted his grip hastily to the gangster's collar and hauled him clear of the ladder. The next man he handled in the same way, almost noiselessly; and after a longer interval he arranged the third beside his friends. These three were not small men and carrying them up to the *Toro's* deck was about all the lifting McFarlane cared to do.

When the job was finished, he found that there was beginning to be a scarcity of unoccupied ringbolts amidships. Some of the other prisoners appeared to have recovered consciousness but not their fighting spirit.

McFarlane was not angry any longer and he began to wonder about the effect of the cold wind on the three dripping newcomers. The fiddley grating solved all his problems, supplying anchorage for the three even while it warmed and dried them out. McFarlane added their arms to the pile in the galley and sat down on the doorsill to rest.

It seemed to him that he had been a long time aboard the *Toro*. He knew her well and felt a vague sympathy and pity for her that was as strong as love. How could a ship be what a ship ought to be with such management? A captain and mate who would leave a fortune in sables to the care of two men whom they had seen for the first time a few hours previously, a drunken boy for second mate and drunken engineers. Then give the ship a bad name, call her a hell ship and raise insurance rates on her.

It seemed to McFarlane suddenly and definitely that he would not be able to bear watching her degradation, so he went into his room, packed his bag slowly and brought it out to the head of the gangway. As he set it down, footsteps ground in the gravel of the quay and Captain Hogan and Mr. Herschel came on board together.

McFARLANE received them in silence. As the captain stepped clear of the gangway he nearly stumbled over the nearest of the prisoners and grunted in surprise.

"What's this?"

He stooped and swung the gangway light inboard, illuminating a wide section of deck. The five gangsters in the open were in plain sight, one or two sitting up sullenly, the others still flat. Captain Hogan looked longer at Joe and Werner, but did not speak. As he moved, the light reached the open door of the fiddley, showing three more men spread out inside.

The captain turned the light squarely on Mr. McFarlane.

"What's this, mister?" he asked.

"Well, this gang of yeggs wanted to plunder the ship." McFarlane found even the form of respect difficult. "Only by luck they didn't."

"Yer lip's swelled up and yer eye looks funny, mister. Is that the best they could do? Weren't they heeled?"

"I chucked their stuff in the galley."

The captain and Mr. Herschel crossed over to the galley and turned on the electric light inside. McFarlane followed and looked through the doorway. He could see Hogan's lips moving as he counted to himself.

"I make it," the captain said reverently after a minute, "eight gats, some of 'em with silencers, five blackjacks, a handful of files and jimmies, three sets of brass knuckles and a sawed-off shotgun."

"He did not haff a gun himself," Mr. Herschel said dreamily.

Captain Hogan held out a thick, brown paw.

"Mac, I want to hear more about this, but now, shake hands."

McFarlane's right hand jerked, came up halfway from his side, but fell back again. He took the captain's hand clumsily in his left, without much enthusiasm.

"What's matter with your right, Mac?"

"The first of 'em landed me with a blackjack. It's coming around all right."

"And you took the other seven with your left hand. Eight altogether." The captain turned abruptly to Mr. Herschel.

"Well, Dutch, here's the crew Mac promised us in time to sail in the morning. I guess they'd rather sail with us than go up the river. You good for your end?"

Herschel stood quite still, with a soft, abstracted look in his eyes. It seemed to McFarlane that the mate had withdrawn into himself for a moment, to feel sensuously the power and coordination of his own body.

"Yess, sir. I am good for my end."

"Right. We'll mug 'em and fingerprint 'em and if they jump ship or try tricks we'll send the data ashore. You can make sailors of 'em. Teach 'em an honest trade."

The three officers went on deck again together.

"Mac," the captain said, "ye got the crew I wanted and ye saved my furs."

"I wasn't givin' a damn for your furs," McFarlane replied sourly. "It was the ship I wouldn't have 'em makin' free with."

For the first time the captain's eye fell upon the suitcase sitting at the head of the gangway.

"That's not yours, is it, Mac?"

"Aye, it's mine. I don't like the way this ship is run."

Hogan chuckled.

"Now ye're beginning to talk like an officer o' mine. But maybe, after all, ye don't really know how this ship is run. If ye're thinking about my remark about mess boy, I apologize, full and free. I want ye for second mate. The wild boy knew he was second only until I found a good man. You're him, Mac. We know you can handle this crew. Herschel's got to get the feel of 'em yet."

McFarlane shook his head.

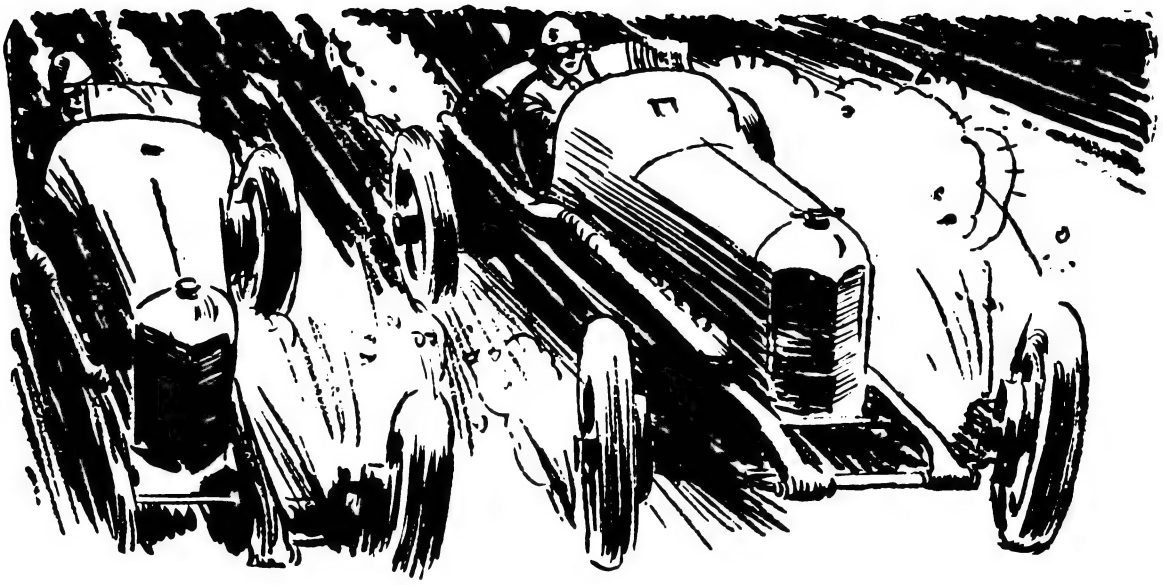
"I can't see a good ship mishandled."

The sly look that came into Captain Hogan's broad, rugged face was nearly ludicrous.

"Aye, but, Mac, listen. Suppose these prime seamen get out of hand, what do ye think they'll do to the ship? And she's a good ship, every rivet driven by hand. And did ye ever see such hull lines in a cargo boat? She's come through hurricanes and typhoons without denting a ventilator, this ship has, but let these yeggs loose on her without the proper men to handle 'em. . . . "

McFarlane's jaw was like granite.

"Say nae mair, sirr," he interrupted through his teeth. "I'll gae wi' ye th' treep."



GREASED BRAKES

A Tale of the Racers Who Ride with Death

By BARRY LYNDON

HE DIED very quietly. A blue Delage went crashing past, rocking all over the road as the driver fought his car out of a tearing skid. The scrabbing tires slung dust and stones at the Frenchmen who were dragging the wrecked Knight off the circuit, and I bent close to keep the road spume from Jimmy's face.

He lay on a dusty patch of grass. The crowds at Beaucourt Corner were straining over the palisades to look at the smoking débris of his smashed machine, and cars still in the French Grand Prix kept storming past.

Every driver knew how dangerous Beaucourt Corner was, and every man who rocked by the battered Knight knew that it might be his own turn next time round. But not one of them took his foot off the pedal. They were all out after Zeill, just as Jimmy had been.

If he had passed that wild driving Frenchman on the corner, he would have snatched the lead. That is why Zeill had not given way, and that's why Jimmy had crashed.

He had known the chances he was taking in trying to corner with Zeill. Eighty miles an hour was the safety limit for the Beaucourt turn, and even then a car needed all the road. Some of them had wanted more, as you could see from the broken staves in the palisades, where the hubs of thrashing wheels had skimmed the woodwork.

Jimmy had tried to corner at a hundred and five and leave half the road to Zeill as well. He had failed.

His head moved against the crook of my arm as one of the Fiats went past—a crimson, wedge tailed streak of speed, with its black mouthed exhaust coughing flame.

Through all the droning scream of the Italian car's blower, I caught Jimmy's little sigh. His eyes closed, and another race racked speedman had gone to the Valhalla they keep for those who think two miles a minute is slow.

The French doctor took off his hat. His gray hair showed silvery in the sunshine as he shrugged his shoulders sorrowfully, then said something to a poilu who was standing by. I helped to carry Jimmy over the top of the low bank beside the road, and we laid him down at the foot of a tree. Another soldier came up and covered him with a field blue overcoat.

Jimmy Neville was the sort of fellow who would ride out the last laps of a race with his car all but falling to bits under him, knowing what would happen if something vital broke, but carrying on just the same. He had all the nerve there was, and not many drivers could match him for cool skill.

But he had made a mistake on Beaucourt Corner and he paid for it with his life. The luck of the game broke badly for him, because if I had crashed every time that I'd made a mistake at a hundred odd miles an hour I should have needed an army corps of nine lived cats to pay for my errors.

As it was, my last mistake left me with a limited steering lock in one arm, and for that reason the Ace people had given me the job of looking after their racing team. We had three machines cluttering the road in this Grand Prix, and I had come over to Beaucourt to try and find out why they were so slow. I had been just in time to see the crash.

Just as I moved away from the foot of the tree, a young fellow came pushing through the crowd with half the Knight pit staff behind him. He had the same lean features as Jimmy and the same dark eyes, but without the fire in them. The two were brothers, and they called this one Gerald.

His face was like wet chalk; wet chalk with a light on it. And his eyes were the color of oil in a drip can, black with stark fear and horror.

He stopped when he saw Jimmy's car. There was blued smoke wreathing from the riven engine cover; the cockpit was orushed, and over the broken side jutted the fractured rim of the steering wheel. A couple of race marshals were tidying up the tattered remnants of the torn tires, and two others were throwing sand over an oil patch in the road.

Presently Gerald looked at me.

"Is he—hurt?" he asked, and the words all but choked him.

There was no need for me to answer, because he caught sight of the grim little pile at the foot of the poplar, with a pair of oil smudged canvas shoes sticking out past the poilu's coat.

He stared at it for a moment, then his eyes half closed and he reeled on his heels. He would have fallen if one of the mechanics behind him had not held him up.

GERALD had been driving another Knight in the race, but he lacked the nerve of his brother, and he had got into the team only on the strength of Jimmy being so good.

I had seen him at the pits before the start, and he'd been as nervous as an owner driver using a spanner on his car for the first time. He had wrecked his gear box on the second lap through sheer shakiness and misjudgment, putting himself out of the race.

He remained staring at the foot of the tree for nearly a minute, then he straightened up and walked towards it. The rest of the Knight crowd stopped where they were, silent and awkward. I felt the same way, because it's difficult for a man to know how to act when another fellow is finding out that his only brother has gone the way of a lot of other good men.

Gerald turned towards the car and looked at it as though he could hardly believe the reality of what he saw. After a while, he asked me:

"Did you see it happen?"

"Yes. And I wish I hadn't. Your brother was a darn good man."

"Better than I'll ever be." His voice had something like a sob in it. "They say he—he took the turn too fast, trying to pass Zeill."

"That's right," I said. "He was in——"

"Zeill wouldn't give him the corner," he cut in, and it sounded as though he was talking to himself. "He raced Jim for it, made him go too fast and get into a skid. Zeill killed him."

That was a bad thing for a man to say, and I glanced at him. I could see that he was overwrought, and he looked shaken enough to be in the mood to say anything. He added something else, but it was lost in a sudden roar from the crowd on the corner.

An instant later Zeill's Lorraine came storming round, brake drums screaming on the kicking axles, shuddering wheels slamming stones at the wreck as the car went by, still well in the lead.

And, as it passed, Zeill thumbed the strap from under his chin and lifted his crash helmet in salute to the dead man. That with his Lorraine bucking on the road at anything up to a hundred miles an hour.

Not until the vibrant roar of the engine had died and the machine had disappeared down the dust hazed straight did Gerald Neville move. He looked at me for a moment, glanced at the field blue coat in the shadow of the tree, then turned abruptly and went thrusting blindly through the crowd.

Men made way for him hurriedly, staring at the expression on his face. The Knight men watched him go before they came towards me and I told them what I had seen of the crash.

"If Zeill had slowed and given Jimmy the corner, he'd have got round safe?" one of them asked. "It must ha' been Jimmy's corner by rights." Then he added: "But you don't always get your rights with a wild riding devil like Zeill. He didn't have to slow down just because another car challenged him for the turn; but it's tough luck on Jimmy."

I stayed to see the ambulance away before I returned to the Ace pit. My team was due in for replenishments, and the drivers were pretty quiet when they pulled up, because they had seen the débris of Jimmy's crash and needed no telling that he had passed out.

There was some talk of withdrawing the team, and the Knight people had already flagged in their one remaining machine in tribute to Jimmy. But we decided to keep going, although by this time the French crowd was yelling itself into laryngitis every time that Zeill brought his speediron past the stand.

A Delage and a Fiat were dueling for second place half a lap behind, both ready to rev their engines beyond the danger line if anything happened to Zeill. Nothing did happen to him.

He took the checkered winner's flag half an hour later, at which the crowd swarmed out of the stands and said what they thought with flowers. Two minutes after the car had stopped, Zeill's Lorraine looked as though it had skidded through a florist's shop and had brought out all the stock with it.

There was a banquet to the drivers that night, but none of the British teams attended it because of poor Jimmy's death, while the Frenchmen cut the proceedings short for the same reason.

I heard that they had taken him to a little brick building just outside the Beaucourt Hospital. I went over with the Ace team, and we took a few flowers. On the way, I saw Gerald again.

He was with the girl.

I THINK this about women: If it's your job to ride a car to its limit, with a swift finish waiting for you if anything breaks or you happen to forget that you are handling a bullet on wheels and not a family saloon—if that's your job, then you've no right to have a girl sitting in the stands, with her hands going wet and dry and her heart revving up from fear of what may have happened every time you chance to be a bit late coming round the circuit.

Maybe I am wrong. But if ever I had given up this game for a woman, the last I should have chosen would have been a girl like the one who was walking beside Gerald Neville.

She had the thoroughbred spirit of a racing car and allied to it was a show model finish. How far back Joyce Hamilton could trace her ancestors, I don't know, but it must have been a long ways. However, I did know this: both Jimmy and his brother were in love with her. She seem to prefer Gerald, and it was because of this that he had broken into the Knight racing team.

She admired Jimmy for the daring way in which he drove, and I believe the reason he had taken that fatal chance on Beaucourt Corner was because he hoped that, by snatching the lead and setting himself to win the greatest of all road races, her admiration might deepen to the point where she would mistake it for love.

Gerald had got into the Grand Prix in an effort to show her that he was as good as his brother. He wasn't, and he never would be, so far as nerve went, because he was not built that way.

When he had come through the crowd after the smash, with his white, wet face, I had read what was in his eyes. He knew that, but for the luck of the game, he might have been lying at the foot of the poplar tree instead of his brother. You can kill yourself just as dead touring round a racing circuit at seventy miles an hour as you can at a hundred and twenty.

He hated the thought of putting his foot down and riding a car on the narrow limit which lies between safety and smoking disaster; but he dared not let the girl know because she admired men who were game and daring.

With a long line of tight nerved Hamiltons behind her, the one thing that she could not understand was a man being afraid. I had seen her lap Brooklands as a passenger, at a hundred and twenty-five miles an hour, dead time, with the off wheels a tire's width from the lip of the banking to come into the paddock afterwards and say that it was great fun. About another five miles an hour, and the car would have been riding thin air.

She didn't know but what Gerald thought that kind of thing was great fun, too, and he had done his best to hide his dread from her.

She was holding his arm and looking up at him as they passed me now. Neither took any notice of my quiet little bunch, and I heard her saying:

"No one can prove that Zeill did it deliberately, but he must have known he was forcing Jim out. If he did, Gerald, there's only one thing to do."

"Drive against him on the Givors Circuit, and ride him off the road as he did Jim," came his voice, and there was a timbre to it like you get if you hit drawn steel—quivering and metallic. "I'll do it, Joyce!"

I thought those words over that night, and it was easy enough to figure out what Gerald meant to do. He was going to run a car at Givors, the next big French race, and pit himself against one of the finest drivers who ever held a cord bound wheel—Zeill. More than that he was going to crash him so that Jimmy would be avenged.

No doubt the girl thought it was a romantic and courageous thing to do, and Gerald would go through with it so that she might never know how much he was afraid of high speed work.

It meant that he would have to fight and beat the fear which obsessed him, and I couldn't see him doing that. In addition, it was one thing to say that he would run at Givors, but quite another to get a car. After the sorry show he had made in the Grand Prix, I knew that the Knight team would not give him a mount; neither would anyone else.

I watched the entries. A Delage team came in, and Bugatti entered five cars. The Knights signed up about the same time as we said we would run an Ace team and try not to get into anybody's way. Germany entered a couple of Mercedes, but Gerald Neville's name didn't figure among any of the drivers.

THE day before the lists closed at double fees, I heard that a Rackenbaker was going to help cut up the Givors Circuit. I thought that another of those board track experts from the U. S. A. was coming over to find out just how much a French road race isn't like a half mile board speedway.

Two days later I saw the official entry list. This Rackenbaker had been put in by Gerald Neville, and it was to be driven by the entrant.

Rackenbackers are extraordinarily fast. This particular car had been built specially for American board tracks, and it had a maximum speed of something like a hundred and forty-five miles an hour, but it had not been designed to stand up to the fierce stresses of a road race.

I thought that Gerald would fit a tougher gear box and strengthen the car in other ways for the Givors Circuit. But I did not hear of him doing anything like this, and he seemed to be spending most of his time on the engine.

From the news which filtered through to me, I could tell that the Rackenbaker would be good for about a dozen laps in the actual race, and would then crack up. It was plain that Gerald wanted the car to stay only long enough for him to get Zeill.

I mulled all this over. It seemed to me that if he went through with this and crashed the Frenchman, he would be doing something next door to plain murder.

I didn't want telling that if I spoke to him about it, I should get a pretty cool answer and no satisfaction. If I went to the race stewards and told them what I thought, they might listen and return his entry fee. In fact that was the most likely thing to happen—if I went to them. I didn't.

I had a feeling that the whole thing would work itself out in a way that I could not see, and there was always the chance that Gerald would funk it at the last moment or, still more likely, drive badly and wreck his engine.

Getting the Ace team ready drove the Rackenbaker out of my head for a while, and in the fulness of time we ran the machines to the Givors Circuit. As usual, we were late, but I sent the team out for practice next morning with instructions to hold the cars in until the drivers knew their way round the circuit. When they had gone I went to look for the Rackenbaker pit.

The replenishment pits are little enclosures built in a row at the side of the course and in front of the grandstands. There is one for every team in the race, and cars pull in there for repairs or fresh fuel.

The Rackenbaker was out on the track, and Gerald's three hired mechanics were lounging about the pit. I marked them for hardboiled engine wreckers, so clever that they couldn't have held down jobs in a mass production factory.

Each would have styled himself an "expert racing mechanic," and when a man takes the trouble to call himself an expert you may know that he isn't. Experts don't talk, but these four talked quite a lot. They said that the Rackenbaker had been down there for five days, and the fastest lap it had done had been seventy-one miles an hour. Zeill, I know, had lapped at well above eighty.

The slowness of the Rackenbaker was accounted for by the fact that Gerald was taking the corners as though there was a six wheeled tractor waiting for him on the blind side of every bend, and he was handling his brakes the same way as I would handle a month old baby.

Obviously, his brother's crash had made him worse than ever.

He came into the pit while I was there, and I took the chance to look at his engine. It was running as sweetly as a clock, tuned to its limit. When he sat in that cockpit, Gerald was behind the wheel of the fastest car in the race. He knew it, I knew it, his mechanics knew it—and so did Joyce.

She spent a lot of time at the pit during practice, and she must have realized how sinfully slow was the Rackenbaker. Nor could she have missed the fact that the three mechanics were beginning to make a joke of the car; but nothing of that showed in her manner.

One of the men, especially, was full of what he'd do if he were driving. This chap was a big, swaggering fellow named Prior; but I knew that one lap at even the Rackenbaker's crawl would have sent him sick to the nearest *estaminet*. That's if you could have got him into the car at all.

THE night before the race I spent working on one of the Aces. She had blown a hole in the crown of a piston, and I wanted to be certain that she was all right to run. Next day I saw my team off to the start, then slipped along to the Rackenbaker pit.

Gerald was just leaving, fixing his goggles as his car ran past the stands. Zeill flashed by him on the way to the line, debonair and cool as ever. He was one of those tough, wiry Frenchmen, as reckless as fate and a devil when he saw a chance to win.

The girl was leaning over the pit plank and looking after the Rackenbaker, her arms resting among the tools. She smiled when I came up, because I had been able to lend them a hand during practice, easing a little trouble they had with tires.

Knowing what was afoot, perhaps I shouldn't have assisted at all; but one racing team always helps another where it can. And if I hadn't done so then Delage or Knight or somebody else would have slipped in. Apart from that I couldn't see Gerald doing anything in the race, since he hadn't shown himself nearly fast enough to ride anywhere near Zeill.

"You got him away, all right?" I asked Joyce.

"Yes, thank you," she said. "His engine is running splendidly."

"An' he's out to win," Prior cut in, and his big mouth stretched in a grin. "We've seen to that, ain't we?" He looked round at the others. They all laughed.

They had something up their sleeves: anybody could see that. There was a clever air about them, as though they had done something mighty smart and wanted to be congratulated.

"You've seen to it. What d'you mean?" I asked them.

"He told us he wanted to sit on Zeill's tail, an' we've fixed it for him," Prior said. "He's got to go fast, whether he wants to or not!"

I said nothing. Up at the start the engines were revving for the drop of the semaphore, azure smoke shooting back from the slamming exhausts. The speed-hounds were bellowing in the leash, and they'd be slipped in a minute.

"That Rakenbaker's hotted up to beat anything on wheels," Prior grinned. "Only he ain't got the stuff to make it show its paces. He's yellow; got a streak in him as wide as the road."

He didn't care whether the girl heard that or not, but she might have been made of marble—she was white enough now—for all the emotion she showed.

"He daren't take a corner fast, but he's got to in this race. You don't think we've worked on the car not to get a show, do you?" Prior asked me. I knew just how much work they had done; most of it had been with crooked elbows at the *estaminets*. Prior added, "He'll take the turns as fast as the fastest—if not faster!"

Then I knew for certain that they had done something which they thought was clever. I hadn't long to wait before Prior came out with it. Presently, he boasted: "We reversed the thrower rings in his back axle last night. He'll have to take the corners fast—because he's got greased brakes!"

THE cars went away from the start just as Prior told what he and his fool mates had done. I heard the girl gasp as she turned and stared blankly at the cloud of oily smoke the scuttling machines had left behind them.

I watched it, too; thinking as fast as I knew how, while the shattering roar of the massed start blared in the air. In the back axle which Gerald had fitted to his Rackenbaker was a little device designed to prevent oil getting to the rear brake drums. Prior and the others had turned these thrower rings around so that they would not pick up oil but would sling it to the brakes shoes, greasing them and making them ineffective.

Their idea was that, with no brakes, Gerald would take the corners faster. The born idiots knew so little about the game that they didn't understand how racing cars took a turn: up to it at the limit of speed, brakes hard on at the last possible moment, the machine slowing like magic for the corner, then around and off again.

How was the Rackenbaker to slow swiftly for a turn if it had no brakes? They were thinking that Gerald would have to take a corner fast, simply because he couldn't slow. That way lay disaster.

Of course, he had his front wheel brakes left to him, but they would probably serve only to make things worse by running him into a front skid.

"You'd better flag him in when he comes round on the first lap," I told them, "or he'll kill himself!"

"He won't come in!" I felt Joyce's hand on my arm. "He won't trouble to look for signals. He's—" She broke off and drew me out of earshot of the mechanics. "He doesn't mean to run for more than a few laps. He isn't in the race to win it."

"I think I know why he's in the race," I said, and she looked at me quickly. "But he won't go fast enough for——"

Again she cut me off.

"Won't he?" Her voice was almost a cry. "Won't he? I talked to him before he went out to the start. I told him that he was too slow in practice, that he was afraid. He said he—he would show me!"

She had spurred him on to do the thing they had planned. He had started out keyed up to drive like fury and get Zeill early, wanting desperately to prove that she was wrong about him. Naturally he he wouldn't pay any attention to his pit or look for flagged signals.

" He *was* afraid," she said. "I thought I wanted him to be like Jimmy, but I don't. I can see it now." She caught the front of my overalls with a pair of slim hands that were as pale as her face. "And it may not have been Zeill's fault! Gerald tried to tell me that; but I wouldn't listen. I want him out of it—safe. We must stop him, *somehow!*"

Her voice was jerky and choking. She was frightened for him, and I could see that this thing went deeper than I had imagined. She had guessed all along at Gerald's weakness, and she had urged him into the race just to silence her own fear that the boy she loved might not be the iron nerved type of man she admired. Avenging Jimmy was just an excuse, and Zeill. . . .

What was going to happen to Zeill? Gerald would try to get him as the Frenchman had got Jimmy, slashing around a corner somewhere on the course.

"He might come in on his own, when he finds his brakes are all wrong," I said to the girl, but she laughed—a short little laugh with a gasp at the back of it.

"He won't, now that he has started," she said. "He won't come in until—something—has happened."

"Well, where is it to be?"

"At Broulle Corner," she said. That was the last turn before the cars came past the pits and the stands, and it was about half a mile down the road. "He won't be able to control the car without proper brakes!" Joyce exclaimed. "Oh, those three fools! I must stop him. If I could get to that corner, perhaps he could see me and understand that something is wrong."

There was faint hope of him seeing anything while he was wrestling an almost brakeless car around a turn that was the fastest on the circuit. If he got as far as that—which was doubful. Joyce started off for the corner while she was speaking, and I followed her. We ran together along the back of the pits and onto the road.

THE course was eleven miles around, and we got to the Broulle turn just in time to hear the leading machines coming at it.

The outside of the corner was hedged by a high sand bank, and the seats behind were solid with spectators The inside was marked by a safety palisade, and more spectators were packed in the enclosure that lay behind the safety zone back of this fence.

The bellowing roar of approaching cars drowned everything else. The crowd swayed, and a fraction of a second later a blue car came round the turn. Zeill, in his low built Lorraine.

Right at his tail was the white Rackenbaker, boring straight for the sand bank in a slashing, front wheel skid.

I could see the dust spurting from the tires as they slid, and my heart kicked as it seemed that the machine must crash. Just at the right moment, Gerald took his foot off the brake pedal, the rear wheels slung round, the Rackenbaker's tail wagged and he was off after Zeill.

The watching girl gasped and her slender fingers clutched my arm. She said something, but I never heard it because the pack came thundering round the curve. The cars showed as blue and red and green streaks in the surging dust, brake shoes squealing, blowers whining,. exhausts belching flame and shuddering sound. Round they came, with my Aces lying fourth, seventh and tenth, all nicely positioned to wait chances.

The machines slammed out of sight along the straight. Two or three lame ducks came battling round as the crowd settled to wait for the leaders to show up again.

"I thought he was going to crash!" The girl was still clinging to my arm. "He'll kill himself! Isn't there some way to get him off the course? Couldn't the stewards flag him in?"

I answered

"Listen: He knows all about his brakes and he knows what he's doing, or he'd never have got round just now. But he'll tear his tires to pieces, taking the turns like this. They won't last half a dozen laps, then he'll have to pull in to be reshod. And we'll stop him going out again."

"But half a dozen laps may be too late, and if a tire bursts on a turn—" She didn't finish it.

We were both on our toes as we waited for the machines to come round. The mad roar awoke beyond Broulle Corner, and once more the crowd gasped and swayed. The white Rackenbaker ripped into the bend—leading—and, as it showed, the car slithered squarely across the curve, full in the path of the following Lorraine!

Zeill stood on everything, slowing as though he had run into mud, while the Rackenbaker careened on in a wild slide, to straighten out and leap away side by side with the French machine.

Zeill's eyes were blazing behind his goggles as he lifted a hand from the wheel and shook his fist, but the white car's driver took no notice. Gerald's lips were parted, and I could glimpse his gritted teeth and the strained muscles at the sides of his jaw. Then the machines went roaring away and, fifteen seconds later, the pack came round; strung out, now, with my Aces still well placed.

"Gerald tried it then!"

I knew that just as well as the white-faced girl beside me. He had overtaken Zeill on the turn and had deliberately shot across his track to rush him into a skid.

Only the Frenchman's clever driving, and the fraction of a second's grace, had saved him.

I wondered what was happening on the rest of the circuit. Gerald must be driving as no man had driven before, judging every corner to thousandths of an inch and doing miracles in skids to get round.

With as good as no brakes he would lose time on the turns. To keep up with Zeill he would have to ride the Rackenbaker on the straights until she trembled in her speed. He was proving that he had several different kinds of nerve, and I let Joyce know it.

"I don't care, I want him out of it! He isn't being brave, it's just desperate recklessness. I wish he would burst a tire so that he would have to stop; burst it somewhere that he could hold the car safely."

MACHINES that had dropped back were rocking past where we stood at the end of the sand bank, flipping stones at us. But she seemed not to notice it, and picked out the sound of the Rackenbaker's exhaust long before I did.

"Here they come!"

It was Zeill who showed first this time, coming with a vicious roar and riding wide so that he could cut the inside of the curve. In the instant that he appeared, the Rackenbaker slashed out in a fierce, deliberate front wheel skid, and looked as though it must cut the road directly in front of the Lorraine.

I saw Zeill's head jerk up, and his mouth opened in a shout that was lost in the tearing whine of brakes and the scutter of tortured tires on the road. He was done, and he knew it. He'd have to pull out to miss the white car, and that meant hitting the sand bank for an eighty-mile-an-hour spill.

It happened in a split second. And in the very last fraction of time, Gerald let Zeill off.

He took his foot from the brake pedal and stamped on the accelerator, so that the Rackenbaker shot on and gave the Lorraine a clear road. Gerald did it in the instant that he had all but accomplished what he had set out to do, and it meant the finish for himself.

He slued sideways, and the tail of his machine hit the sand bank. The car bounced off with a terrific cloud of dust founting behind, a wheel breaking as it slid sheer across the road again, just missing the Lorraine as Zeill hurtled on.

The side of the Rackenbaker caught the palisade, ploughing on with wood and débris striking up in a black, shifting shower. The sound of grinding metal was heard above all else.

The breaking wheel snapped at the stub axle. The car heeled over, then somersaulted high into the air and smashed down on one side, to go skating past the sand bank for nearly fifty yards before it nosed its shattered, steaming radiator into the grassy slope at the side of the road.

The girl was first to the machine, but I was next and I helped her to get him out from under the smashed steering wheel.

He had ducked down there at the moment of the crash, and I had to borrow a rifle from one of the French soldiers who came running up before I could lever the steering column sufficiently to drag him out.

I thought he was dead, but he wasn't. He had instinctively played the one card left to the racing driver when his machine gets out of control: duck down in the cockpit and hope that the steering wheel will save you if the bus turns over!

We set him down just clear of the wreck, with Joyce kneeling at his side, holding his head in her cupped hands while two doctors felt him over, looking for broken bones. They found only bruises.

"Gerald! Wake up, Gerald!" She said that again and again as she gazed down into his dust caked face, flecked by tiny streaks of blood where flying stones from the Lorraine's wheels had caught him. Her voice was almost a whisper, but presently his eyelids lifted slowly and he looked up, just as though he expected to see her there.

"I couldn't do it, Joyce." His lips were quivering from the shock of the crash, and the words came jerkily.

"I know. I know you couldn't. I'm glad you let him go. Oh, you were fine, Gerald—fine!"

She was trying to smile as she bent over him, because she could see that he had the kind of nerve she had never understood before—the will finally to force himself to do the things from which his body quailed.

He had matched Zeill in the fastest laps of the race, with a car that the Frenchman himself wouldn't have dared hold to its speed. He had conquered his fear. Yet, when it came to doing the actual thing for which he was riding, he had balked—because it was too cowardly.

"Joyce, I was—afraid—all the time," he said shakily.

"Oh, Gerald dear, so was I!" Her arms were around him and her cheek was pressed against his own as she sobbed the words again: "So was I!"

THEY'RE married now, those two. I hear that they drive around in a twelve horsepower saloon which would buck if you tried to drive it from here to there at more than fifty miles an hour.

But the girl seems quite content.

* * *

EARLY LINDBERGH

By SAMUEL TAYLOR MOORE

THE first American to navigate an aerial vehicle through the skies was a Philadelphia carpenter, James Wilcox.

How he earned for himself on December 28, 1783, the distinction of being the first balloon pilot on the American continent is a story of fame seeking out the man instead of vice versa.

Earlier in that year, in Europe, two Frenchmen had sent sailing aloft in a basket attached to a hot air balloon, a sheep, a duck and a rooster. The barnyard trio landed safely enough. An interested observer at the experiment was Benjamin Franklin, then foreign minister of the new United States. One month later Mr. Franklin saw Francois Pilatre ascend 100 feet in a hot air bag to establish the first record of human flight in the world. Within a few weeks he witnessed another successful ascension in a balloon using hydrogen gas.

To two friends back in America Benjamin Franklin wrote of the great aerial feats he had seen. They were F. Hopkinson and D. Rittenhouse, of the Philadelphia Philosophical Academy. They knew how to manufacture hydrogen gas, so they proceeded to fill some fifty small spheroids with the buoyant vapor. Then came the problem of devising a man-carrying machine to which the bags might be attached. They advertised for a carpenter, and James Wilcox got the job.

For several days he worked, fashioning a car to carry a passenger into the clouds. Hopkinson and Rittenhouse inspected the finished product. As they conversed they nodded in the direction of the carpenter. Wilcox sensed evil, so he spoke:

"Imagine," he said loudly, "anybody being fool enough to trust his life to that thing."

"Imagine!" repeated Hopkinson and Rittenhouse colorlessly.

"Yes, sir. I say that only a fool would do it," repeated Wilcox with feeling.

"Now don't call yourself names like that," said Hopkinson soothingly.

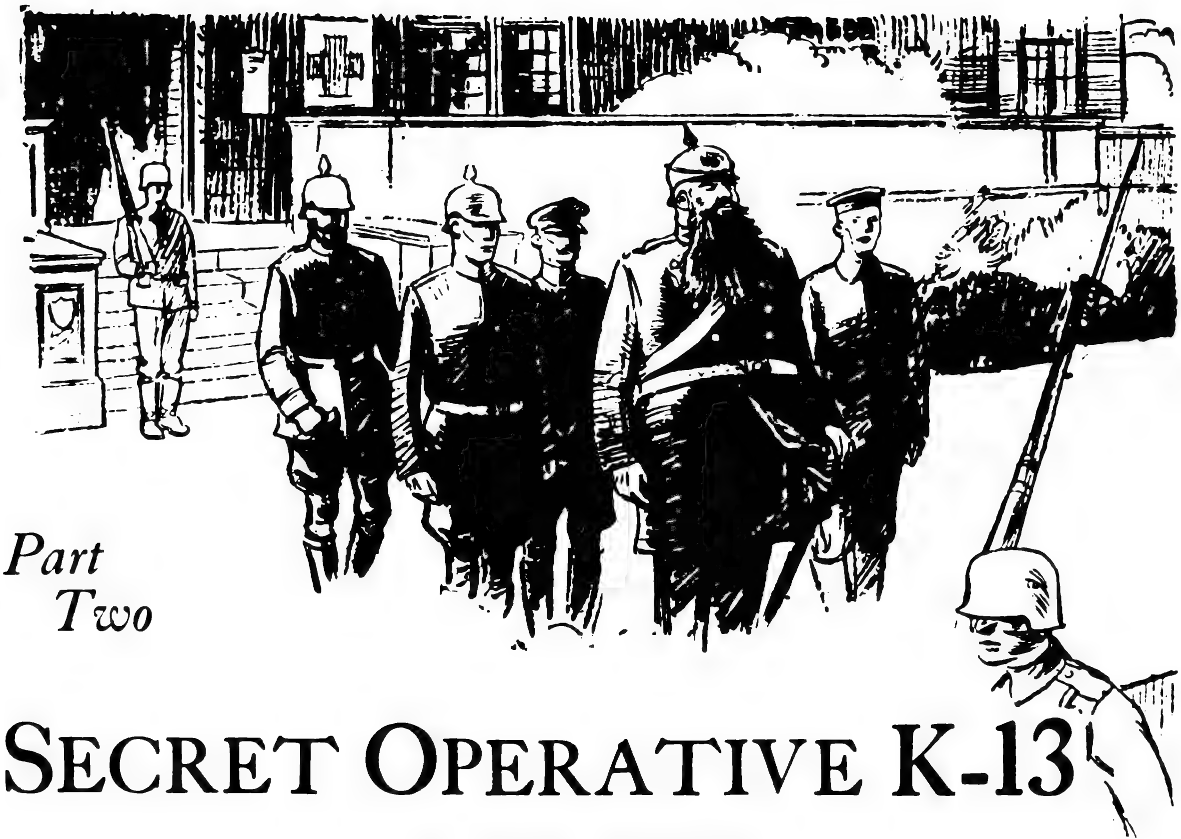
"A hero, more like it," added Rittenhouse.

Wilcox emitted a gasp or two.

"You mean you think I'm going up in that thing!" he exclaimed aghast.

"We have selected you for that honor," they told him firmly.

Wilcox demurred but his arguments of protest were silenced. At length forty-seven of the small balloons were tied to the framework of the car. Wilcox took his station. The machine shot skyward. Over the roofs of the Quaker City he floated, bravely and alone. Suddenly he became nervous, for straight in his path loomed the chill mid-winter waters of the Schuylkill. Hastily Wilcox reached for his knife and cut eleven of his bags loose. His machine dropped rapidly towards earth. He struck with a resounding crash. The car tipped over and Wilcox landed violently on his hand. A sprained wrist was the only souvenir of his history making flight.



Part Two

SECRET OPERATIVE K-13

By JOEL ROGERS

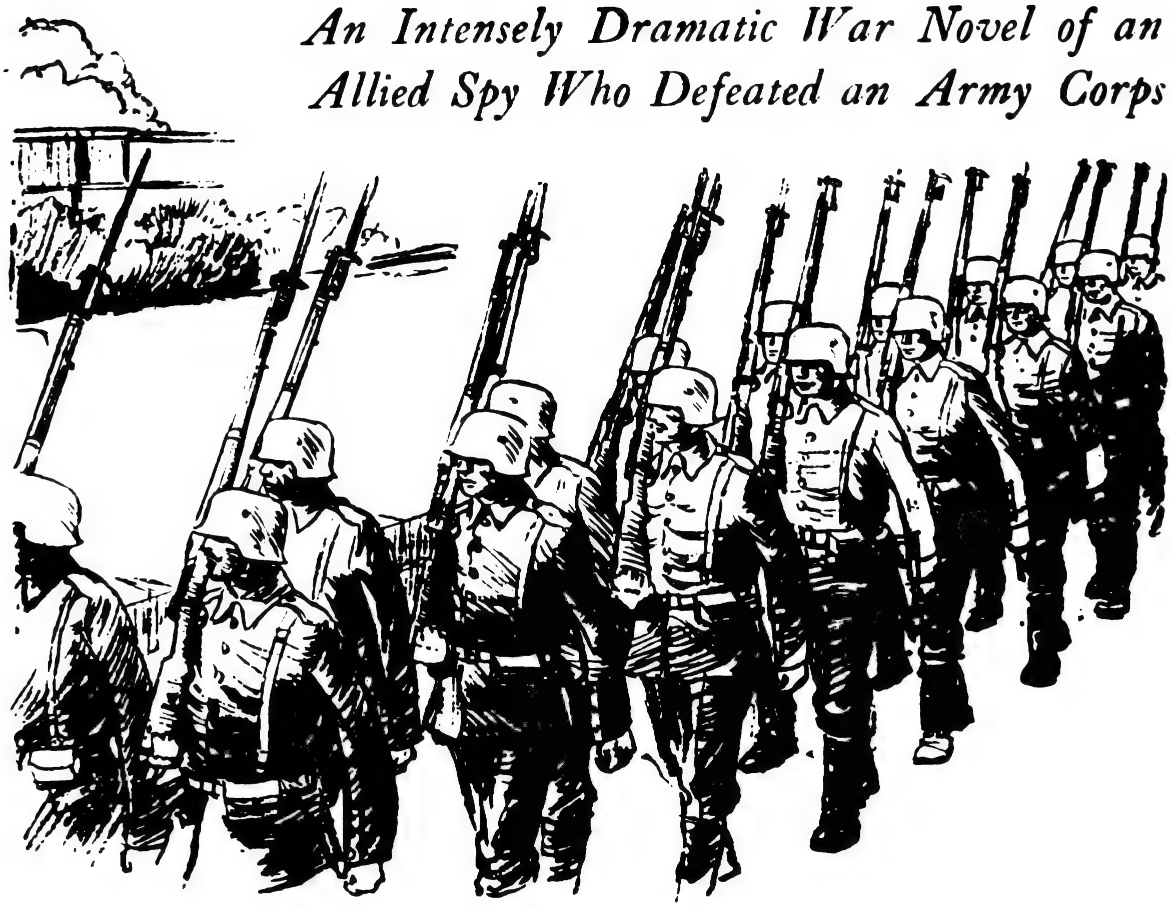
Preceding Events Briefly Retold

A solitary British airplane swooped down out of the sky, straight at the château of Oldemonde, in southeastern Belgium, where General von Schmee presided over headquarters of the Seventh Corps of the Second German Field Army. The flyer was a German spy, and he was bringing military information that might mean the capture of Paris. Colonel von Kleinhals, the Chief of Communications, accompanied by his aide, Lieutenant von Reuter of the Prussian Guards, and the snooping orderly, Sergeant Wolf, met the plane as it landed. Von Kleinhals received the secret papers from the pilot and also the surprising and ominous news that K-13, the great English spy, was known to have penetrated to Oldmonde itself. Von Reuter returned hurriedly to the château to inform General von Schmee. Following him, on the spy's departure, Von Kleinhals and Wolf were attacked from behind in a grove of trees and the secret papers stolen. Von Schmee, familiarly known as "the Butcher", was apoplectic with rage at the prompt activity of the dreaded K-13. Instant measures were taken to apprehend him.

Far on the other side of the battle lines, Captain Tillinghast Wainwright Oakley Face, British flight commander, interviewed his foremost ace, Lieutenant Big Dick Fahnestock. Big Dick was an American of German stock, but his loyalty was unquestioned by his comrades of the Fighters. Captain Face told Big Dick that he had a momentous mission for him to perform. The great K-13 was in danger at Oldmonde, back of the German lines, and the flyer must go to his rescue. He must pose as a deserter, a German spy, perhaps as Number Two of the enemy Intelligence, known to be working with the British Flying Force. Further, because no one knew who K-13 was, Big Dick must trust to luck and wits to discover the English spy at Oldemonde. Though disliking anything but a fighting job, Dick agrees. That night, with the connivance of the captain, Big Dick broke open the company safe, removed certain papers that would establish his position with the enemy, and flew his plane far into Hunland, to the château of Oldemonde.

Big Dick landed on the lawn of the château. He was immediately made prisoner and questioned by von Reuter. The young Prussian officer sneered at his claims of being a German sympathizer and accused him of being a spy. Raging, Big Dick was led into von Schmee's presence. Von Reuter took the papers the flyer had brought and decoded the message that accompanied them. There were duplicates of the important papers that had been stolen by K-13 that morning, and a betrayal of Big Dick. He had been sent as a decoy to protect Number Two of the German Intelligence, who was none other than Captain T. W. O. Face of the British Royal Flying Corps —Big Dick's commanding officer. And it was advised that the American flyer might be useful to von Schmee in locating K-13. Berserk at his betrayal, Big Dick was set upon by a host of sentries and arrested as a spy.

An Intensely Dramatic War Novel of an Allied Spy Who Defeated an Army Corps



CHAPTER V

K-13

SOMETIME between the midnight and the dawn Colonel the Count von Kleinhals, accompanied by his aide, Lieutenant von Reuter, and two orderlies, entered the guardhouse where prisoners were incarcerated. Both German officers wore their swords and full dress regalia, for they had come about a grave matter.

"Arouse the English spy," ordered von Kleinhals.

"You bring an order to release him, Herr Oberst?" demanded the guard officer.

"Not at all," said von Kleinhals curtly. "He will be shot at sun-up. I present you herewith written orders to that effect. Detail your firing squad."

"*Zu Befehl, Herr Oberst.*"

"I wish to examine the Englishman thoroughly and in private now," said von Kleinhals.

He and his aide were inducted into the narrow whitewashed cell where Dick Fahnestock lay sleeping like an ox. Chairs and an electric spotlight were brought. The sentries on guard at the grilled iron door were withdrawn. Colonel von Kleinhals marched quickly across the cell past the sleeping man, and examined the settings of the window bars. He appeared to be satisfied. For an instant he stared out at the naked stars.

"Wake up, Englishman! Attention, and salute!" ordered von Reuter in a high, clear voice, pressing his fingers into the prisoner's shoulder.

Dick struggled to arouse, with the spotlight glaring at his face. He sat up on his cot, scratching his tousled head with difficulty. Irons were about his wrists and ankles, extending to a ring in the wall. In the shadows behind the brilliant light he beheld the tall, red-bearded colonel seated with his aide. Dick blinked against the spotlight. He could not shift his head out of its beam.

He recognized the setting. He chewed grimly.

"The well-known third degree, huh?" he said.

"Who is K-13?" von Kleinhals snapped.

"Oh, go sit on a tack!" yelled Dick wearily. "Bring on the rubber bludgeons and the fire hose! I know more tricks than you two sauerkraut-sniffers ever heard of. My uncle's a precinct captain on the St. Louis force, and they don't make 'em any tougher than that bird. Go on and strut your stuff. But let me tell you something—only a rat falls for the strong-arm stuff. If I won't open my trap, you can't pry it open!"

"What does he say?" von Reuter asked in German.

The colonel translated.

"You're wasting your time," said Dick. "Go on to bed and get yourself a lot of nice, quiet beauty sleep. It'll improve your looks one hundred per cent. And even then you wouldn't be causing any riot in a Ziegfeld chorus."

"Who is K-13?"

"I don't know!" Dick yelled.

"That is incredible," said von Kleinhals.

"I don't lie," said Dick. "And I don't take kindly to being called a liar by whiskery pretzel-peddlers. Take these irons off me, and I'll explain my objections in more detail."

The colonel was staring closely at him, with keen eyes from the darkness. Von Kleinhals was a suspicious man. He trusted no one—as was befitting a high officer of the great and secret *Nachrichtenamt*. Yet the square-rigged face of Big Dick Fahnestock, brilliantly illuminated, was as honest as a babe's. Colonel von Kleinhals had learned already that the wild American giant was not a good liar, nor even a passable one.

"If I knew who K-13 is, I'd be glad to tell you so," said Dick grimly, "and then let you try to dynamite it out of me. You two liverwurst-lizards would have to use more high explosive than would blow up the whole of France. Now, douse your headlight and run along. I crave sleep."

The colonel turned to his aide.

"He says he doesn't know," he translated. "What do you think?"

Ritter von Reuter yawned. He had been manicuring his nails with delicate attention. He set the nailfile down on a washstand beside him and uncrossed his elegantly booted legs.

"All Englishmen are liars," he said. "They are very clever fellows. But this dumbhead—well!"

He shrugged.

"Maybe I am a dumbhead," Dick growled in von Reuter's language. "But I'm a *man*. I'm not a canary-voiced female parading around in soldier's breeches."

The young Prussian leaped up, lithe as a tiger from the darkness. He drove his fist full into Dick's already battered mouth before there was time to dodge the blow. Colonel von Kleinhals snatched the raging subaltern quickly back, with a sharp admonition.

"That's a dirty German trick," said Dick quietly, "to paste a guy when he's down. *Eine gemeine Deutsche Eigenheit!* Rap me with a blackjack, if you feel the urge, or kiss me with a brick. But—don't—hit—me—with your fist. That's something I never could stand for, see? I'm liable to get kind of irritated, and pull this whole damned hoosegow down. If ever I get hold of you, von Reuter, I'm going to half break you in two. I'm warning you."

Von Reuter stood twitching with rage—well out of Dick's reach, however, against the opposite wall. His hand was reaching for his sword. It looked like murder right there, and with cold steel.

"Do not forget yourself, Herr von Reuter," admonished the colonel gravely. "This Englishman is a prisoner, and must be protected. His doom is set already."

With a low oath von Reuter strode out the door. In the corridor beyond Dick heard him muttering instructions to the sentries.

Von Kleinhals leaned over quickly, as if he were about to communicate something in confidence to Dick, now that they were alone. His lips were partway open. His suspicious glance strayed all around him. He listened. But he thought better of it. He extracted a handkerchief from his breast pocket, wiping his forehead.

There was a faint tinkle on the floor. Some other object had been pulled forth with the handkerchief. It dropped to the floor beside Dick's cot with that almost inaudible metallic clink. Quickly and unobtrusively Dick put his foot on it.

"Did I lose something?" von Kleinhals muttered, patting all his pockets.

He stooped and examined the floor, then his pockets again. He shrugged, and resumed his position of scrutiny.

"If you do not know K-13," he said, "how did you expect to make contact with the spy?"

"By using my bean, if I have any," said Dick.

"Ah, yes," agreed von Kleinhals, with an ironical laugh. "If you have any."

"Don't hand me any more of those cracked guffaws," said Dick. "It sounds like a bearing was busted in your throat."

"You persist in refusing to give me any information, Mr. Fahnestock?" said the colonel softly. "There are ways, you know, of making even the most stubborn tongues——"

"You can make a mule kick, but you can't make it bray," said Dick grimly.

Again Colonel von Kleinhals shrugged. He glanced at his watch.

"It is my duty to inform you," he said, "that you will be executed by a firing squad in one hour and twenty minutes. At sun-up. That occurs at 5:15, precisely. If there are any communications you care to make, it would be best to make them now. We should like to know your age and education. Your civil and military honors. Your next of kin. These matters for our records. I will send in a chaplain before I depart. Do you wish a pastor or a priest?"

"When was the court-martial pulled off, according to the forms of war prescribed?" said Dick. "Who were the judges? Where was my defense?"

"The occasion seemed to General von Schmee hardly to necessitate the legal formalities," said von Kleinhals delicately. "You are a spy caught red-handed. You stand convicted by your own statements. There would be no advantage in prolonging matters, in running through a rigamarole of judicial technicalities and red tape."

"In this uniform I am a prisoner of war," said Dick. "I am a sub-leftenant of the British Army, captured in full military apparel. If you try to shoot me for a blasted spy, hell will be turned loose on this place, and on every man within it."

"Ah, yes," said von Kleinhals, blowing his bright silken beard away from his lips with a quiet laugh. "In civil life I am a lawyer—*ein Ratgeber*. I recognize the theoretical merits of your case. Why do you not procure a writ of *habeas corpus?* Or perhaps protest to the American Ambassador? Or you might write a book about it. In case you decide to seek the services of legal counsel, inform him that his client is the nameless man in a German prisoner's uniform, buried in the sixth grave from the end of the old brick wall, ten paces from the manure pit down behind the stables. That may help to identify you when he seeks his writs and injunctions."

"I hope you've dug the hole big enough," said Dick with a cold grin. "It's going to have to be mighty big and deep to hold me."

"How big and deep it will be is for you yourself to determine," said Colonel the Count von Kleinhals. "You will be marched out at a half hour before sun-up—that is, in forty-five minutes—to perform the necessary labor."

"Much obliged to you, sir, and to the Butcher, and all of 'em," said Dick. "When the Fighters hear of this, they'll be coming over to drop down a few posies in memory of me. And those flowers won't be forget-me-nots or lilies. They'll be bouquets of Vickers' fire and TNT that will blow up every living thing in Oldemonde, and blow the whiskers off your face and the head off your shoulders. When the Fighters hear of this," he said, "they'll blow up hell in Oldemonde. And it would be better for you if you were dead deep in the ground than facing them."

A bony-faced German soldier peered around the edge of the grilled cell door. His deep-set cadaverous eyes stared at Dick a moment before he vanished. Dick felt a sense of depression he could not shake off at sight of that deathly look. He had seen the man creeping around before, walking silently, vanishing stealthily, like this.

Von Kleinhals sprang up.

"Just a moment! I want to speak to you, Sergeant Wolf."

He slammed the cell door hastily behind him. He went down the corridor in pursuit of the bony-faced soldier. For the moment Dick was left alone.

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Kleinhals or the sentries. But nothing happened immediately. The Germans were too deeply engrossed in their argument. The sudden darkness in his cell had not been noticed. But the absent-mindedness of suspicious-eyed Colonel von Kleinhals could not last much longer now.

"O God, only let me get my fists free!" Dick prayed. "That is all I'm asking You."

The key slipped into the lock of his handcuffs. The lock was clumsy and old-fashioned. If the key did not precisely fit, still it seemed to be moving the tumblers. Dick heard the feet of men shifting about, as though they were preparing to return. His thick fingers seemed imbued with a sense of marvelous delicacy. In an instant, with a soft grating sound, the handcuffs slipped loose.

The leg irons came more easily.

He was free now, and sweating with nervous exhaustion. That excruciating instant had worn him out more than an hour of the hardest labor. But his hands were free now. They would not be locked again while he was alive.

Silent and wary, he crept to the cell door. It was on the latch, indicating von Kleinhals' intention of making an immediate return. He heard von Kleinhals out in the guardroom, issuing final orders regarding a firing squad. He heard the sound of rifle butts as they met a floor smartly, low laughter and the shuffling of feet. He even heard the striking of a match, so near to him was the guardroom.

"You will dress the Englishman in a regulation prison uniform," said von Kleinhals. "The blindfold may be omitted if he desires it. But keep the irons on him to the end."

"Zu Befehl, Herr Oberst."

"He is an extraordinarily dangerous man, both because of his physical strength and his simulated air of innocence. He is very sly. Do not relax your precautions in the slightest until the medical officer pronounces life extinct. Lieutenant von Reuter has requested the privilege of commanding your firing squad. It is a personal matter with him. If convenient to you——"

"Gladly, Colonel. It's a work I could never quite stomach."

"Better have your digestion looked into, then," growled von Kleinhals. "Spies are to be shot. Summon the chaplain."

On his toes, quick as a flash, Dick searched about him for some weapon. His hand closed on a nailfile that the elegant von Reuter had left on the washstand. It was long and of unusual strength, a stiff rasp as sharply pointed as a dagger. Dick Fahnestock, like most other Americans, knew what a German or an Englishman never knows—he knew the use of cold steel. It is an inheritance from the Indian wars which has become a part of the national psychology.

He took stand by the door. The first man who came in that door would not go out again. Nor the next, nor perhaps the next.

"Are you done with the prisoner, Herr Oberst?" asked the officer of the guard.

"Not yet," said von Kleinhals in a lowered voice. "He'll betray K-13 to me before I'm through with him. That reminds me of a story. Have you heard that Madame Alys Dervanter—stop me if you've heard this one——"

Whispers now. Von Kleinhals and the guard officer suddenly burst into roars of laughter together.

Still Dick's partial liberty had not been discovered. Von Kleinhals was so sure of him. This luck could not hold out much longer. It was far too good to be true. After all, von Kleinhals had been away hardly a minute. Perhaps not thirty seconds. Perhaps not half of that. Time means nothing when a man is face to face with death.

Dick slipped to the window. With all the strength of his powerful shoulders he tugged at the bars. There were two of them that he could feel move faintly and gratingly in their cement settings.

Now with the nailfile! Quick!

The guardhouse had been converted from an old servants' lodge of the château of Oldemonde by the installation of cell blocks and window bars. It was adequate for the purposes of a military calaboose, imprisoning soldiers convicted of minor infractions of discipline. Yet undeniably the work on it had been hastily and transiently done, like much of the work of wartime. The cement in which the bars were set, for instance, was not of good texture. It had become friable through weathering. Beneath the desperate picking of the steel file it loosened in grains and clots.

"At 5:15, then, Herr Hauptmann," von Kleinhals was droning to the officer of the guard. "I shall probably be present as an official witness. I gave you the death warrant?"

"Yes, sir."

"I will now bid my adieus to the Englishman."

The step of Colonel von Kleinhals in the corridor! Dick Fahnestock had one bar removed by then. But he could not squeeze his broad shoulders through.

"Ah, wait, there is the chaplain," said von Kleinhals.

His slow steps moved away again. Dick worked desperately.

"Guten morgen, sehrwürdige Kaplan!" said von Kleinhals, with a hearty laugh. "Well, we have a little business for you. An English spy. I will present you to him, and allow you to wrestle with his soul."

Again his laughter.

"Erlöst oder unerlöst, Herr Oberst?"

"Unredeemed, I'm afraid," said von Kleinhals. "He comes from America, where the Christian religion is unknown. They are mostly redskins there, you know, and worship idols."

"So I've heard," said the chaplain. "I will instruct him in the creed and a few fundamentals."

"Wait," said von Kleinhals. "Did I ever tell you the story about——"

Dick had two bars out of their sockets then, and he could have pinched his way through. Yet for an instant he stood by the window, staring out at the silent starry night, at shadows which moved among the cedar trees, at dew which glistened darkly on the grass.

It seemed to him that there was someone out there watching him.

And it seemed to him that Colonel the Count von Kleinhals—high officer of the great secret *Nachrichtenamt,* keen and shrewd-witted Chief of Communications of this devil's nest—far from having forgotten him or being absent-minded about him, was actually procrastinating his return so as to give Dick time to escape. *Colonel von Kleinhals wanted him to go!*

Why?

Suddenly Dick saw on the window ledge a bit of paper no larger than a cigaret paper. And when he picked it up, he saw that was what it was. A message in English was written on it with microscopic black letters. He was in no flurry now to be gone. He read the words closely by the light of the stars.

> *Big boy, don't let these Jerries put one over on you. You are being allowed to escape by von Schmee's orders. From the moment you leave you will be trailed, in expectation that you will meet, and so betray—*
>
> *K-13*

Big Dick spat into the darkness. He chewed the flimsy bit of paper up, and swallowed it.

BEYOND his cell window were a few massive beech trees, shadowing a smooth sward. Beyond them, a hundred yards or more away, was a cedar wood, black as the pit. The silence stirred, and no sentry moved.

Who had put that message there?

In a moment the form of a peasant girl appeared from out the darkness of the cedar wood and moved across the grass. She walked demurely as a cat that has just eaten cream. She turned and blew a kiss to someone unseen in the wood behind her.

"Till tomorrow, Hans, sweetheart!" came her clear, laughing whisper through the night.

Suddenly she looked up at the guardhouse. As if moved by an impulse of idle curiosity, she strolled toward it, humming softly to herself.

Her hair seemed golden or flaxen-colored in the night, hanging in two long thick braids over her shoulders. Her bodice was black velvet, laced. Her light colored skirts were short and full. She was wearing clumsy wooden shoes. Yet her bare brown legs were slender and well shaped, which was something that could not be said for all the peasant daughters of Hainaut in Belgium. Big Dick Fahnestock believed that a man is not dead until he stops noticing good-looking legs. If he had been facing von Reuter's firing squad in that moment, so long as there was life in him, he still would have admired the looks of hers.

"Boy," he whispered to himself, "those are some *jambes!*"

She approached, a dim ethereal figure,

across the shadowed grass. She stooped and plucked something from the ground. Perhaps it was a four-leaf clover or a dandelion. She was sauntering from a rendezvous, Dick surmised, with some German soldier. Sweet little traitress! Well, who could blame her? Some of these Hun brass hats were handsome rascals.

"Far be it from me, sister," Dick thought, "to throw the asparagus."

A long distance off through the silent night came a sentry's sharp challenge to some late wayfarer.

"Wer geht?"

"General-Major Ferdinand Oberling Kaiser Schmid!"

"Advance, General Schmid, and be identified!"

No other sound.

Innocently the girl with the fair braids came on across the grass, humming to herself. And the tune she was humming was the old Lorelei tune of the Rhineland Germans, which Dick had heard on his mother's breast, and which tugged at his heart.

". . . Sie kämmt ihr goldenes Haar;
Sie kämmt es mit goldenem Kamme,
Und singt ein Lied dabei. . . ."

Though her features were unrecognizable, suddenly Dick knew that he had heard her voice before, and somewhere at Oldemonde. Quickly his mind searched back. But the memory escaped him.

As she passed a great beech tree, a low voice spoke to her a sharp command. She paused and stared, then replied in laughing Flemish. An arm reached out from behind the huge beech to seize her, but she eluded it, simpering.

"Halt an!"

A German soldier crept into view. He cast a quick, wary glance up at Dick's window, then stepped a pace or two sheepishly after the girl. She flounced her head and faced him with a provocative gesture.

"What wert thou doing, sweetheart," he whispered, "with Hans Sieger in the wood?"

She replied with some mocking Flemish phrase which doubtless the German understood. He burst into subdued laughter. He seized her waist in a rude grasp and bent her head far back. In the darkness she laughed up at him. Her arms stole softly up around his shoulders. When her right hand had reached behind his head, she dealt him one quick thud at the base of the brain.

It must have been a sandbag in her hand. The German slid to the ground without a whisper.

Dick had been watching this brief romantic scene meditatively. As the German crumpled, he dived out the window. He sprawled upon the soft grassy soil, and got to his feet immediately, running like the wind. The girl had kicked off her shoes. Barefooted, she fled toward the cedar wood.

At the edge of the wood she paused an instant, a slim, tense shadow against the impenetrable gloom of the thick evergreens.

"To the hayfields beyond here!" she whispered as Dick ran toward her. "Lie low in the sixth stack you come to, till I join you! We've got to get out of here, both of us, big boy, and I don't mean maybe!"

It was as pure an American accent as was ever heard at Vassar. Dick was almost up to her now. She slipped in between the whispering trees, lithe and pale in the night.

"You are—?" he gasped.

"K-13!"

It was no more than a breath. He was not sure he had heard it. Was not sure he had even seen her, now. She had vanished like a shadow. And where she had been, there was nothing.

"A girl—well, I'm damned!"

He ran breathlessly on through the wood toward the hayfield that had been pointed out to him. Once he thought he caught sight of her again. But it was only a spotted, half grown fawn, aroused from slumber and rushing eerily away. He saw no other living thing at all except a solitary German soldier standing erect and motionless with his back to the trunk of a juniper tree. The fellow was lashed fast to the tree, and a gag was in his mouth, and his eyes were huge with terror. No doubt he was the soldier Hans Sieger, one of the *Nachrichtenamt's* human hounds set to trail Dick, who had been so unwary as to make a rendezvous with K-13.

Dick slipped backward silently, avoiding the bound man before those terrified eyes had seen him. He crept across stubbly hayfields in the shadows, and buried himself deep under a mound of sweet new-mown hay.

CHAPTER VI

THE BUTCHER'S BEARD

IN THAT cold black half hour that comes just before the dawn, Lieutenant-General Paul Friedrich Hermann von Schmee, Baron of Eglesdorf, Count of Schlossheim, commanding officer of the great Seventh Corps of the Guards—the "Invincibles," as they were known, the hammerhead of von Falkenhayn's flank—aroused from a profound dream. He lay on his back a moment, staring at the darkness with frightened eyes.

He had dreamed that a formless and obscure shadow had crept into his bedchamber through the open window, and had passed by him into his great headquarters office room beyond. There had been no shape to this shadow he had seen in his dream. It was no more tangible than smoke. Yet there was a terror in the quiet passage of it which had caused a sweat to break out on the broad backbone of the general, even in his profound sleep.

His soul was wrenched awake. He lay inertly, cold with his own sweat, staring at the ceiling with small, unblinking eyes. There was no one in his bedchamber, no nightmare vision, no shape of smoke. There was no shadow lurking in all the blackness which he could not identify.

Below his opened window he heard a pair of sentries conversing lazily together, yawning and snickering at times over some joke. He examined his watch. The hour was a quarter after four. He had been asleep three hours, then, since the conclusion of a long conference with his staff over the reports of Number Two that had been brought by Big Dick Fahnestock. It had been a quarter after one when he issued his final instructions for the movements of the 7th Corps. In the intervening time he had slept heavily.

What was it that had awakened him? It had been a nightmare dream.

He lay and listened for any sound from his great headquarters room. In there he kept his records and battle plans, his secret orders, maps and code books. It was the heart of his command.

Why was the massive oak door closed into that room? It was always open. He slept with his bed so arranged that he could see through the door, watching the small night light burning above his ponderous safe. Now the door was closed. And no wind had blown it. General von Schmee breathed softly.

He pulled out a Lüger from beneath his pillow. Soft and quick as a huge cat he sprange up, and slipped across the floor. His glance was gleaming red.

Beyond the door he heard the faint crisping and rustling of a paper, as if examined in haste by trembling hands. It was a sound that made his huge body quiver with silent suspense. Yet he was no coward. Far from it. He listened, and heard no more.

Suddenly he flung the door open, snapping an electric switch that flooded all the tall wide room with light.

"Wer ist's?" he snarled.

No one there at all. The gleaming doors of his safe were closed, he saw, and the customary night light burned above them. The paper was still rustling on his carved oak desk, but there was no visible hand to move it. Suddenly, as he tiptoed toward it with pointed gun, a frightened mouse leaped down. It scurried like a gray streak down the edge of the wainscoting.

No intruder here. He had been frightened by a mouse, that was all. By a mouse, and a nightmare dream.

"Ach!" he growled, shaking his head.

He shuffled down a short corridor leading from the headquarters room. He tapped upon the outer door of Vrow Alys Dervanter's suite. Meditatively he scratched his stomach.

"Sweedhard," he whispered, "are you asleeb?"

"What iss it?" her drowsy voice replied.

"Nefer mind. It is nuttings."

He returned to his desk, and rang a buzzer. A brisk brigadier general reported immediately from the smoke-filled anteroom beyond, where a handful of aides and sentries kept the night-long watch. Only by that anteroom and his own bedchamber was there entrance to the headquarters room.

"It is me," said von Schmee grimly. "Do not stand there looking at me like I was a piece of cheese."

"Pardon, Excellency——"

Von Schmee waved away the stammering apologies with a gesture of his hand.

"Who has entered here, General Mittel?" he said.

"No one, Excellency."

"Who has gone out?"

Brigadier General Mittel coughed discreetly.

"The lady, if His Excellency will pardon——"

"What lady?" growled von Schmee.

"The lady in the peasant dress, with the elegant brown legs and the yellow braids," said the brigadier in confused surprised. "Was she not Madame Alys?"

"The vixen is not a lady," snarled von Schmee, with a dark look on his face. "If she has been out, upon what business? And how has she re-entered? Question the sentries at my window. Inquire if she returned that way."

He padded softly down the corridor again. At the door of Vrow Alys' suite he listened to her quiet breathing. He had regained his desk when Brigadier Mittel returned.

"The lady did indeed enter by His Excellency's bedchamber window," he said, coughing behind his hand. "If His Excellency will pardon me, my compliments. . . . An enviable conquest. . . . The lady had a very chic air about her. . . ."

"Madame Alys?" said von Schmee, with a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"She was not recognized as Madame Alys by the sentries at your window," explained Mittel hastily. "A true peasant girl, but very charming. It was understood . . . A rendezvous. . . . His Excellency need not fear my discretion, nor that of the sentries. . . . After all, we live but once. . . . Only the brave deserve the fair, as the poets say, ha, ha, ha! If His Excellency will pardon——"

"Not Madame Alys!"

Von Schmee's broad face had grown deathly ill. The blue veins throbbed on his temples. He clapped both hands to his heart. For a moment he breathed with difficulty. A terrible intuition had come to him.

"Excellency!"

Von Schmee hurled an ink well at General Mittel's head.

"Fool! Fool!" he shouted. "Fool three times damned! It is K-13 who has been in!"

He leaped to his safe, and spun the dials of it. Thank God, nothing had been touched. He had been too quick and wary, or else the construction of the safe had balked even the incomprehensible skill of the master spy. He leaned against the opened doors, recovering his breath.

"Change all the guard!" he cried. "Arrest, and hold in close confinement for court-martial, the sentries stationed at my window! Send out the alarm! Capture this false peasant girl! Do not shoot! I will have K-13 alive!"

A reaction from his fear came over him. Laughter rumbled in his throat. He washed his huge hairy hands together.

"We have K-13 now," he said. "Send in von Kleinhals and his aide! Likewise an orderly-sergeant attached to von Kleinhals' department, by name Sergeant-Ordonnanz Wolf."

WITH a nervous hand von Schmee pulled out the priceless reports of Number Two. Untouched. He sat at his desk and ran through them. But what was this? His lips moved with silent ejaculations as he examined the papers more closely. Suddenly he struck his forehead a sounding blow.

"Asleep!" he muttered. "Ach! How could I have been so stupid?"

As he had remembered the analysis, three veteran British divisions under Major-General Sir Keith Cothaven were reported lying heavily entrenched at Laraine Wood, while at Hill 439, thirty miles to the east along the Somme, a single brigade of battle-exhausted troops under Lord Worleigh, without fresh reserves and depleted of artillery, was straggled out along three miles of front. Against Worleigh at Hill 439 von Schmee had aimed the thrust of his eighty thousand picked Invincibles, in a blow that would sunder the British line and open the wedge to Paris.

"Madness! Madness!" he gasped. "My eyes were blind! I must have been asleep!"

Now, analyzing the reports again, he saw that he had directly reversed the true situation. It was Cothaven at Laraine Wood who lay helpless, and Worleigh at Hill 439 who was impregnable.

He wiped his sweating forehead. Rapidly he drafted a series of revised battle plans.

His lips moved soundlessly. His shaven skull was wrinkled like the hide of a rhinoceros, as he bent all the energies of his sagacious brain to this game of superchess.

"Thank God, it is not irretrievable! I would have been decimated. I must have been mad."

Furiously he rang his battery of buzzers.

"Colonel von Kleinhals, without delay!"

He paced up and down. His flat, naked feet padded on soft rugs and gray slate flags. He scratched his swaying stomach.

"My whole staff, Kleinhals! Immediately!"

Von Kleinhals had only thrust his red-bearded face in. He disappeared at once. In a few minutes von Schmee's division and brigade commanders began making their entrances. One by one they clicked to the salute, staring at their commander with more or less well concealed astonishment.

"What is loose?" shouted von Schmee, waving his arms at them. "Do not stare at me like educated pigs!"

His eyes were crimson with anger. He thought he heard someone snicker. He strode up and snapped his fingers beneath the nose of a fat major-general with a shining baby face.

"Revised plans of battle!" he said to his assembled staff. "We attack Cothaven at Laraine Wood! Artillery, no preliminary bombardment! Concentrate on Hill 439 as a feint. Tanks march with the infantry! At eleven tonight we thrust through in mass! The same hour, but change of objective! Get under way!"

He waved his huge black-haired hands furiously. The general with the round baby face was still staring with bulging eyes. Suddenly he burst into deep repressed chuckles. The tears came into his eyes and he held his ribs, while his fat body jiggled all over. Right into the face of Herr General-Leutnant von Schmee he laughed.

"What is loose?" screeched von Schmee. "Why have you the giggles, Herr General-Major Schmid? At what hour did I become such a monkey-face that you must laugh every time you look at me?"

He was purple with rage. He banged a great fist on his desk till his jewel-hilted sword slid over the edge and clattered to the floor. He put up his hand furiously to rumple his magnificent beard. But his hand clutched nothing.

Helplessly he fumbled, over his breast, about his chin, and a look of blank amazement gathered on his face. He stared down. He saw then that all the luxuriant, spiky, thick black beard had been scissored off close to his chin. Worst of all, the edges of it were trimmed in deep scallops.

"*Mein Bart!*" he said. "*Was ist los mit ihm? Wo ist er gegangen?*"

The beautiful, proud beard was gone, the pride of his soul, the adornment of his face. All gone. Gone with last year's snows and the dust of withered flowers. Vanished without a trace. *Spurlos verschwunden.* His hand fumbled at his breast. His thick lips trembled, and tears came into his eyes.

"My beard! What is loose with him? Where is he gone?"

Yes, he had been plucked. He, General-Leutnant Paul Friedrich Hermann von Schmee, Frieherr von Eglesdorf, Graf von Schlossheim, and so forth, and so forth, had been shorn like a naked lamb.

Colonel von Kleinhals advanced gravely to him then, and unpinned from the breast of his striped silk pajamas a cigaret paper that bore the single word——

"*K-13*"

CHAPTER VII

THE BETRAYER

ALL MORNING Big Dick Fahnestock lay hidden in the dank, musty hay mound behind the château of Oldemonde. At times squads of soldiers went hurrying by on the hunt for him, led by sharp-voiced sub-lieutenants, empty scabbards slapping against their thighs, carrying bayoneted rifles at the port.

"*Recht! Recht! Gewehr—Auf! Doppeltempo—Marsch!* Hep! Hep! Hep!"

They were looking for him in places farther away from Oldemonde than the hayfield behind the cedar wood. Particularly the search was being carried on down in the swamps by the sluggish Meser River, two or three miles away. Yet on two separate occasions the field was thoroughly explored. Peasant women working down at the far end were closely questioned. The endless mounds of hay were tossed about and probed with sharp bayonet thrusts. Once the edge of a bright steel blade ripped through his coat sleeve as he lay quiet as a dead man on the ground.

The turning over of one more handful of straw then would have exposed him to the rifles. But an impatient voice called the searcher away.

The hot noon came and passed. He lay for long hours without motion, bathed with sweat in the torrid heat. Where was K-13? There had come no sign nor message. He boiled with impatience. Yet there was nothing to do but wait. She knew the game, and he did not. Any movement on his part now might only hasten her betrayal.

He tried to learn, from brief snatches of conversation he heard as the searching parties passed, whether the girl had been caught. There was much laughing and banter among the Germans concerning a battle soon to be engaged in, mingled with boastful promises that they would be drinking beer in the Paris cabarets in a week.

"Well, old horse, a couple of these Parisian ladies on your knee, hey? That is better than being a sausage-maker. Can you parley-vous?"

"Only with my hands, ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, the ladies of Paris will understand."

"They say they are very kind-hearted. They say they like them big——"

A roar then from some sweating unterleutnant.

"Silence in the ranks! *Gewehr—Über!* Hep! Hep! Hep!"

There was no word spoken of K-13. Dick hoped that it was a good sign. Yet it might mean the very worst.

He learned that dogs had been sent for to trail him down, none being at Oldemonde.

AT ONE o'clock the peasant women who were mowing the last grass down at the far end of the field laid down their scythes. It was the dinner hour. They sprawled themselves down behind hedgerows out of the sun. Their faint, cheerful voices came to Dick, as they investigated their ample dinner baskets. A great hunger seized him.

Two of the women detached themselves from their companions and came sauntering over toward his end of the field. One of them had thick ropes of yellow hair hanging down over her shoulders. Far away he saw them gleaming in the sunlight.

When she and her companion had drawn nearer, however, he saw that she was not the graceful girl he had been expecting Her cheeks were rosy, it was true, and her eyes a bright ocean blue, and no doubt her soul was virtuous. But she was built like a haystack and her legs were the legs of an elephant. Out of her could have been carved three such girls as the slender elfin shape which had vanished from Dick so fleetly in the darkness.

"What a box-car full of legs!" he groaned.

The two women carried food baskets. Sauntering casually, they approached and sat themselves down on the shady side of the very stack which concealed him. They talked together in Flemish, with loud hilarious voices. Unfortunately he understood none of it. An impulse came to him to make his presence known, and ask by pantomime for a handout from their baskets. It was a shame for a couple of big fat girls like that to stuff themselves so full of food.

He heard them chewing with loud contented smacks. He was so hungry he felt as if he were breaking apart in the middle. Yet he lay quiet, being doubtful how far he could trust them. They were Belgian, it was true, and the Belgians in general had shown a heroic patriotism which not all the blandishments nor the rigor of the conquerors had been able to diminish. But there are traitors in any nation. The girls might have German lovers.

Soon, indeed, a pair of German soldiers approached and greeted them like old friends. Dick was glad then that he had not betrayed himself. The soldiers talked in halting Flemish, answered by shrieks of laughter and some crackling words that sounded like hot stuff. Concealing their baskets beneath the hay, the women arose. Arm in arm with the Germans, they sauntered off.

Only one of the bulging baskets had been devoured. The other was untouched. It nestled in the mound almost against Dick's nose. Black bread and cheese. Hard-boiled eggs. Big, shiny green apples. Even a pint bottle of wine. How that cheese smelled! Dick drew a deep breath that carried the whiff of it clear down to his stomach.

"I bet if you stuck a fuse in it, you could blow the whole damned castle clean off its roots," he thought. "Yee-how! I'd rather be married to that cheese than to the Queen of England."

He could resist the temptation no longer. He extracted a slice of black bread and brushed it across that cheese. The two fat wenches would never miss it. One bite, and the whole basket had met its Waterloo, cheese and all. He couldn't control himself after that. He didn't let up on the good work till he had washed down the last egg yolk with the last lees of the musty old wine.

He lay like a bloated hippopotamus, unable to move for a while. That wine was loaded with dynamite and the spirit of '76. It went rolling through him like the Mississippi and plastered the hair on his head. He felt the urge to give a war whoop and climb up out of that hay pile. He figured there wouldn't be any trouble in whipping the whole Hun army now. The only reason he failed to jump out with a yell and begin a one-man march toward Berlin was that his tongue was paralyzed and he was too stuffed to even wiggle.

"Maybe they'll think the field mice have eaten it," he prayed, surveying the emptied basket dizzily.

By and by the big woman with yellow braids returned. She retrieved her basket without a word and went away again. But there was a quiet smile on her big, healthy face.

Dick understood then that the meal had been arranged by K-13. So K-13 was not working entirely alone!

IN THE afternoon the dogs came on, keen, fierce, wise animals trained to war. Smarter than many men, they were. They padded down the edge of the field in a pack, black as wolves, with silent snouts to the ground. They were no foolish yapping foxhounds. They were man-hunters and man-killers. They went about their business without commotion.

As yet they had been able to pick up no scent at all. His trail from the guardhouse through the cedar wood had grown stale, and was crossed by too many other trails. Beneath the fringes of the damp hay he watched them padding past down a hedgerow, under guard of half a dozen soldiers, von Reuter himself urging them on, sharp and eager. They were to windward of the field. They did not get the scent.

"*Reicht an! Bekommt ihn, Schurken!* Smell him out! Get him, you rascals!"

Von Reuter's iaint, clear voice came barking over the distance. A whip like a blacksnake was in his hand. He was not goosestepping now, but moving with the quick, undulating lightness of an Indian. Von Reuter also, like his wild, lean dogs, was a man-hunter and a man-killer.

The dogs moved with the discipline of a drilled military machine. They were headed for the marshes of the Meser River. Von Reuter was not wasting time with the hayfields, reported as already thoroughly searched.

"*Tamtam! Vielchen! Schnüffelt ihn aus!*"

Suddenly one of the dogs, younger and less trained than his veteran companions, broke away from the formation. With a hoarse bark he raced down the field in pursuit of a fat gray hare. The terrified hare skittered upright on its long hind legs, doing for a moment a bewildered dance. Then straight as a streak it leaped for Dick's hay mound, and the yellow dog after it, nose to tail.

"*Tamtam! Halt an! Zurück zur Spur!* Back to your trail, Tamtam!"

Dick chewed a grass blade grimly as he watched the murderous race approaching him. The fat gray hare laid back its ears. It was hopping for its life.

"Go and find yourself a hole of your own, you first cousin to a mule!" Dick muttered.

The hare came at him like a batted ball. With one last terrific leap it vaulted into the hay beside him. He felt the rapid stammering of its heart as it nestled against his face, its hind legs convulsively kicking.

The yelling dog, racing up, changed its cry to a hoarser note. It slackened pace. It curled its upper lip as it came growling onward, dragging its belly over the ground.

"All over now but the shooting," Dick thought.

Calmly he selected another grass blade to chew on. Von Reuter came racing down the wind toward the creeping dog. His hand was on his Lüger.

"*Hündin Söhn!*"

He gripped the snarling dog by the collar. His leather lash flickered through the air. The dog was only a puppy, but if it should live to be an old, old dog it would never forget the beating it received that day.

The German military system did not tolerate disobedience from man nor dog. Half dead, von Reuter dragged it by the collar back toward the waiting pack by the hedgerow.

"Vorwärts! Reicht an! Bekommt den Engländer, Schurken!"

They moved at a trot on toward the Meser.

Dick Fahnestock, watching them go, was glad that the young Prussian lieutenant was not so smart as his dog.

ALL THE latter afternoon the thunder of cannon far away drummed and rumbled in the ground. All the afternoon camions loaded with green-clad soldiers rolled through dust clouds down the roads from Oldemonde. Fresh and battle-eager the 7th Corps, the great Invincibles, the picked shock troops that were the hammerhead of von Falkenhayn's right flank, moved down toward the Somme.

Rumble-rumble-rumble in the ground. Faint, yet unmistakable, like the stirring of an earthquake deep in the core of the world. The great guns were opening up against Hill 439, masking the great infantry surprise assault to be delivered that night against Laraine Wood, thirty miles to the west. With the dropping of the sun the constant cannonading grew heavier.

Hay dust sifted down into Dick's eyes and throat. He lay in a furnace.

"My God, they must be throwing the whole Krupp factory, including the adding machine," he thought.

He had never known a cannonading like that before.

"Fritz is getting peevish," he thought. "*Wham!* There went Bertha's grand piano."

Still the dusty camions went rumbling by in an endless flood. The 7th Corps in six divisions, the 2nd Pomeranians, the 38th Poseners, the 17th Saxons, the 11th and 21st Silesians, and a mixed division from Berlin that included the famous Brandenburg Guards—these last wearing proudly the nickname of the Ignorants, because it was said that they knew how to die, but did not know how to surrender nor retreat—eighty thousand men of them, shock troops all of them, the flower of the German Army, fresh from four weeks of rest, splendidly equipped, mustered to full strength with veteran replacements from the Russian front, they went rolling down that hot day in July, '16, to drive the wedge that would cut straight to Paris, and roll up the British line from the Somme to the North Sea.

Eighty thousand men of them, the great Invincibles, the Butcher's pride, the hammerhead of the Army of the West. And they had never been defeated. They had never retreated save on that one day when von Kluck turned back from the Marne. Eighty thousand battle-eager veterans of them, they went rolling down, and rolling down, to thrust straight through Major-General Sir Keith Cothaven at Laraine Wood, and roll on to Paris and the sea.

"Durch Hunderttausend zuckt es schnell,
Und aller Augen blitzen hell . . . ."

Hurrah! By God, they were singing and yelling! To hear 'em, you'd think they had just captured Foch by the whiskers. They were full of schnapps and limburger. Snatches of their voices came floating over the sunny fields, above the *pfut-pfutting* of the camions and the barking of the officers, who—God knows why—always have to bark.

"Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles,
Über alles in dem Welt! . . . . "

That was a band rolling by, sitting in shirt sleeves on a loaded camion, red-faced, balloon-cheeked, tootling on the tuba and the clarinet.

"Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles."

It went lurching down the road. The wind instruments died. But the bass drum went thudding on.

A bugle blew.

"Squad, attention! . . ."

". . . . Home by Christmas, Fritz!"

". . . . English swine! Believe me, I'm goin' to polish this old pig-sticker . . . ."

"Gewehr—Auf!"

"*Auf Wiedersehn,* sweet Marie! . . . ."

The camions snorted and lurched down the dusty road.

"Hurrah!"

"Attention, men! . . ."

"*Hoch! Hoch!* Hurrah!"

All afternoon, and into the darkness, they would go rolling down, and rolling down, those eighty thousand men, those great Invincibles, laughing and singing and yelling, or silently polishing their bayonets. But they did not know, nor did von Schmee know, nor did Dick Fahnestock know, nor did any living soul north of the Somme except only K-13 know, that they were rolling down to death.

For down in the muddy bottomlands of Laraine Wood, Major-General Sir Keith Cothaven of the King's Own Scots, "The Prettiest Lady From Hell," as he was known, lying with three divisions of Yeomen and the King's Own, of Bantams and the Black Watch, was waiting for that 7th Corps, the Invincibles, as a tiger waits for a bull. Behind him the great guns from forty miles of front were massed to open up, with all their ranges set. And throughout fifteen square miles of the muddy wood itself was a perfect thistle patch of wire and machine guns, of field pieces set to rake the flanks, of mines wired to blow up half an acre at a time. Before the night was done, down there in the bottomlands, hell would begin to cook.

God rest the great Invincibles! They were soldiers and brave men. They fought for the faith that was in them. They died like flies. They died like tigers. They went down into that hell's kitchen in mass formation, without preliminary bombardment, unsupported by barrage. They went down at a goosestep in parade rank, carrying their regimental colors, the flags from Posen, Pomerania, Silesia, Brandenburg and Saxony, together with the colors of that German Empire which is dead. It is said ten bands were playing for them. And the great guns opened up on them, the field guns caught them on the flank, in the white light of shrapnel and star shells the machine guns mowed them down by companies, and the ground beneath their feet blew up. Yet regiment after regiment, they kept on. They fell and, dying, they crawled on. They broke through the first line trenches. They were the great Invincibles. They died like fiends. They died like men. They walked on their dead, and died.

When the hour was ripe, Major-General Sir Keith Cothaven, the Prettiest Lady, uncorked a counter attack of his very terrible Bantams, his Yeomen and his King's Own Scots. They went through the Invincibles with cold steel, and they were rather nasty about it, too. For it is probable that they didn't like the great Invincibles.

History says that, of the more than seventy regiments of von Schmee's corps which went into the fight at Laraine Wood, there were four of which no single man came back. Those four were the regiments of the Brandenburg Guards, who did not know how to surrender nor retreat, though they showed that they knew how to die.

The battle of Laraine Wood is forgotten. There have been greater battles. Even von Schmee, who sent the Invincibles to that slaughter, is forgotten. There have been more terrible generals. But it is hoped the Invincibles are not forgotten, for there have been no braver men. In many a little Berlin flat, in many an East Prussian farmhouse, no doubt to this day you may see hanging on the parlor wall a flag-draped picture of some big, smiling man, or some boy with solemn eyes, in the uniform of the 7th Corps. And perhaps there is an Iron Cross with a ribbon draped over the picture frame.

"My man," the *hausfrau* will explain to you, sobbing quietly at the ache of memory. "My man—my son—my father—my husband. He used to be a baker—a potato farmer—a bookkeeper. Always a good provider, and very kind to me. He died in battle with the Invincibles. His captain wrote me that he was brave. He was a hero. See, he earned the Iron Cross."

IT WAS a dreadful day, that blazing July day. It was a dolorous year, that year of damned '16. They were brave and fierce and terrible men who went rolling down and rolling down, shouting and singing and laughing in the dusty camions. They did not know, nor did von Schmee know, nor did any soul within all Hunland know except only K-13, the hell's kitchen they would soon be cooking in.

But K-13 knew very well. For it had been K-13 who substituted forged reports in the safe of von Schmee, causing von Schmee to change his battle plans and divert his thrust from Hill 439 to the trap of the Laraine.

And K-13, watching those rolling camions all the afternoon, smiled a little sadly. The work of Intelligence must go on. K-13, cleverest and boldest of all the English, knew the need of it. He knew his own peril, too. He was in the midst of enemies both ruthless and watchful. Each hour of the day that he walked abroad, each hour of the night that he lay abed, death was beside him, cheek to cheek.

Yet K-13, though neither a sentimentalist nor a softling, though having in himself a great deal of ruthlessness when it was needed, watched those jubilant men rolling down to their stupendous slaughter with a smile that had some pity in it. War is war. Some men must live, some men die. But we can feel a little sorry about it.

K-13 shrugged. For him, the game was almost up. He was aware that two of the keenest operatives of the *Nachrichtenamt*, working at Oldemonde, already suspected him. They were hard after him. It was only a matter of hours now, perhaps only of minutes. At any instant, the tap on his shoulder——

"You are caught, English spy!"

When the Butcher got him, his death would not be easy.

K-13 lit a cigaret. He must flee now, and soon. But he could not desert Big Dick Fahnestock, whatever the price.

Several times during the day he strolled in the direction of the hayfield, keeping his glance on anything except the sixth mound from the south end, where he had directed Dick to hide. Each time that he approached he smelled a mouse. Or rather, several mice. In the cedar wood. Along the hedgerows. Down where the peasant women were working with sweeping scythes.

He was being watched all the time.

Therefore K-13 walked lightly, and smiled often, and smoked many cigarets, and took care not to make one false step.

He must be patient.

All afternoon the camions went rolling down. And hours at a time K-13 stood beside von Schmee himself in the tonneau of a car drawn up before Oldemonde's gates, while von Schmee took the salute from the Invincible's regiments.

"The General!"

Hurrah! Helmets lifted high on the points of flashing bayonets, a forest of steel spears beneath the sun.

"*Attention!* Present—*arms!*"

Hurrah!

"Deutschland, Deutschland über alles,
Über alles in dem Welt! . . ."

The bands tootled. Dust clouds rolled. Sweat poured in rivers from the innocent, round, beer-fed faces of the musicians.

"The General!"

Hurrah!

"Eyes—*right!* Rifle—*salute!*"

Hurrah!

Von Schmee nodded with little twinkling eyes.

"Splendid brigade there, Kleinhals. They are—?"

"The Brandenburg Guards, Excellency! They call themselves the Ignorants. It is said that they do not know how to surrender nor retreat, though they know how to die."

"Very good."

Motors snorted. Officers barked. A runaway riderless horse went galloping down past battalion after battalion. Peasant girls, leaving their work in the fields, sat on fences beside the road, waving and shouting. Tattered regimental stands of war-stained silk passed by—the flags of the 2nd Pomeranians, the 38th Poseners, the 17th Saxons, the 11th and 21st Silesians, and the mixed Jigsaw Division from central Prussia which included the four regiments of the Brandenburg Guards.

Von Schmee turned suddenly to Oberleutnant Ritter von Reuter behind him, with sharp eyes.

"The Brandenburg Guards are your brigade, is it not so, Herr von Reuter?"

"Yes, Excellency," replied von Reuter imperturbably. "Platoon commander, Company D, the 339th. I fought with them twenty months. Liege to the Marne, the Aisne, Ypres, Hill 219, Schlacht von St. Mihiel, Arras. Wounded and captured by the enemy at the Road of Ladies, I made my escape."

"After being reported dead in action?"

"I believe so, Excellency."

"Did I not make some promise that I would give you the opportunity of rejoining your regiment soon, Herr von Reuter?"

"Yes, Excellency. If I do not succeed in discovering——"

He glanced at Vrow Alys Dervanter's corn-colored hair, as she sat beside the general. The fair Dutch lady was fanning her bosom with a silk fan, entranced by the spectacle of so many handsome young men rolling by. Von Reuter leaned over and spoke in a lowered voice to the general's ear.

"I will have K-13 for you before midnight!"

"Very good," said the general.

Rolling down and rolling down, eighty thousand battle-eager men, an endless thick river, gray-green as the mighty Rhine rolling down to the sea. And on them blazed the terrible bright sun that burns in the month of the Lion. The terrible bright sun that on thousand after thousand of them tomorrow would burn no more.

Hurrah!

"Good-by, Dorothea, Wilhelmina, Marie!"

"Hurrah for the ladies of Paris!"

"Hoch! Hoch! Hoch!"

"The General!"

Hurrah!

"Rifle—*salute!*"

Hurrah!

Bayonets gleaming in the sun, thick and straight as a forest of bright spears. The legions are passing by. The legions salute you, Caesar!

Morituri, te salutemus.

"The General!"

Hurrah!

"Band, Hail to Thee in the Victorious Wreath!"

Now the music swells——

> *"Heil dir im Siegerkranz,*
> *Herrscher des Volkes ganz! . . ."*

Lifting their helmets on their rifles high in the air, they rolled by, singing.

Von Schmee watched them with sparkling eyes. His belly rose and sank with his proud breathing. His hand was clicking to his helmet.

We, who are about to die, salute you, Caesar!

Rolling down and rolling down, to where Keith Cothaven, the Prettiest Lady, lay waiting with forty thousand of his Yeomen and his kilted Scots in the trap of Laraine Wood.

The Invincibles!

"Ach, mine liddle Alys!" said von Schmee. "Why are you crying, sweedhard?"

"I am crying," said Vrow Alys Dervanter, "to see so many handsome young men that soon will die. I cannot help the tears within mine eyes."

CHAPTER VIII

"HERE'S YOUR DAMNED SPY, SOLDIERS!"

ABOUT the hour of sunset Vrow Alys Dervanter — the Ambassador from the Low Countries, as the soldiers called her, who must have their little joke —wandered out for her daily after-supper stroll, through the quiet sunlight-dappled deer parks, and around the borders of the shallow carp pond, and skirting the deep cedar wood, and finally even so far as the meadowlands where the last of the summer grass had just been cut to hay that day.

The purpose of her ambulation was to get exercise for her own shapely self, and to afford amusement in chasing field mice to her dwarf black poodle Lilith. Vrow Alys, though as fair as woman ever was, had a terror of growing fat. Her mother had been fat. Her grandmother had been fat. Her great-grandmother had been a whale. So also, as far as she was aware, had been her male ancestors. To avoid the accretion of fatness on her own lovely bones, she had adopted the custom of taking a sunset stroll of precisely two miles and a quarter, through the deer park, around the pond, down to the hayfield, and so forth, and so forth, after which she returned in an exhausted condition to her boudoir suite and massaged the tired muscles of her shapely legs.

These sunset walks were a happy time for the black poodle Lilith. In fact, Lilith lived for them. At all other times the little black dog did nothing but lie on a pink silk cushion and chew viciously at fleas. But at the time of these sunset walks Lilith really lived. She was a sharp-voiced and nasty-tempered bitch who was clipped with a lion's mane. Being somewhat larger than a rat though less courageous then a rabbit, she had developed a furious and inveterate hatred of the whole tribe of field mice. She loved to dash with mad yelping around her mistress's ankles and bark at them. Sometimes she even pursued their squeaking flight for a few yards. Once, indeed, in a fit of extreme heroism she had killed one of them. The victim mouse upon this occasion, however, had probably been one that was totally blind or with all its teeth fallen out from senility. Lilith in spite of her lion's mane and her lion's tail-tuft, would never dare, drunk or sober, to attack a full-grown mouse in all the possession of its faculties. Her soul was the soul of a rat, her heart was the heart of a rabbit, her bark was the bark of a tree toad, her smell was the smell of a weasel, and her mistress, Vrow Alys Dervanter, loved her.

"Here, Lilith! Here, Lilith!" Vrow Alys went softly calling through the quiet sunset woods. "Naughty 'ittle doggie mustn't hurt poor 'ittle mouses."

Sitting to rest on a stone wall at the edge of the cedar wood—a favorite haunt of hers, where she was accustomed to stretch and sun herself like a lazy cat that curves its claws—there Vrow Alys caught a sudden furtive glimpse of a man who moved swiftly and with inaudible litheness through the wood to one side of her. It was Herr Oberleutnant Ritter von Reuter of the Prussian Guards, the handsome aide to Colonel the Count von Kleinhals.

Vrow Alys arose quickly, with her hand on her heart. Silently she followed after von Reuter, as he slipped out of the cedars and went striding across the hayfields with a fishing rod under his arm.

"Fishing?" she thought. "Fishing, han'some man?"

She moved quietly after the erect, lithe young Guardsman over the stubble, shadowing her way from hay mound to mound with more skill than she might have been suspected of possessing. Her pale green eyes had narrowed with a huntress look. The poodle slunk at her heels. There was no one else visible in the mile-wide meadows, except a couple of strapping peasant women crossing slowly over from the hedgerow a quarter mile away.

At the fifth haystack in, von Reuter heeled about. Vrow Alys slipped out of sight immediately. Von Reuter spoke sharply, to someone she could not see.

"Thunder weather, Wolf! You are like a disease," he said. "What are you doing down here with the grasshoppers? Report to Herr Oberst Graf von Kleinhals with my compliments. Inform him I have gone fishing."

Out from behind a haypile the gaunt bony face of Sergeant Ordonnanz Wolf appeared sheepishly, as if he had been discovered by surprise at some business he preferred to keep hidden. He straightened up and stood at salute. Bright spots burned on the cheekbones of his white face.

Von Reuter twisted up his eyebrows, eyeing the shambling orderly sergeant through a monocle.

"Dust the hay off your uniform, you unkempt fool," he said. "I don't want to catch you down here again making love to the farm wenches. Report to the colonel I have gone fishing."

"Zu Befehl, Herr Leutant!"

"Oh, and—Wolf! You might advise Madame Alys Dervanter that His Excellency has been inquiring about her. You will find Madame Dervanter with her poodle behind that hay mound there, the second one from the end."

Vrow Alys arose gaily then, hearing her name spoken. She patted back stray yellow curls behind her ears. Sergeant Wolf touched his brimless forage cap ironically in salute to her, but she passed him by contemptuously. Lifting her skirts about her dainty calves, she went sailing over the stubble toward von Reuter.

"Good efening, han'some man!" she said.

Von Reuter bowed from the waist. *"Guten Abend, gnadige Frau."*

"Going fishing, han'some man?"

"Fischen," said von Reuter.

"Fishing for what?" said Vrow Alys archly, laying her head on her shoulder.

"Fisch," said he.

That exhausted the possibilities of bilingual conversation.

"It iss a pity you do not speak English, han'some man," said Vrow Alys sadly.

Again von Reuter bowed stiffly from the waist, with the precision of a hinge. The poodle came yapping about his ankles. Von Reuter eyed the black beast coldly through his glass, then lifted back a booted foot and planked it in the stomach.

"Verdammnis und Schweinigelei!" screeched Vrow Alys.

So she could indeed speak German, after all. It was something that von Reuter had suspected all along. He grinned quietly and lit a cigaret.

Von Schmee would hear of this.

Whistling softly to himself, he went on across the hayfields toward the sluggish Meser, where squads of men and dogs were still hunting Big Dick Fahnestock.

BIG DICK FAHNESTOCK lay in the sixth hay mound from the end. He had been there fifteen hours when the sun went down. He thought to himself——

"K-13 is around here! K-13 is trying to get some message to you. Boy, watch your step! Use your bean, if you've got any. Don't make a move till you're sure, because there're a lot of Heinies watching K-13."

Vrow Alys Dervanter crouched on the ground not far away, holding her smitten poodle pressed to her bosom, crying like a mother over a child. Her long yellow hair had become unpinned. It had fallen down over her shoulders.

This woman with the pale green eyes—was she K-13? Her delicate pink and white face looked rather haggard and hard in the gaudy sunlight that was growing crimson in the west, while the girl who slipped away from Dick in the cedar wood before the dawn had the fairest face, he thought, that he had ever seen beneath the stars.

Yet he had lived long enough to learn that ladies' faces do not always look in daylight the same as in the night.

K-13?

"Poor 'ittle girl, did nasty man kick her?" she was crooning to that wretched, snarling canine cross between a woodlouse and a flea. "Did nasty man hurt her precious 'ittle heart?"

For some reason Vrow Alys always conversed with the poodle in English. Perhaps that was because the poodle's bristly black lion mane reminded Vrow Alys of the beard which had been the pride of her lord, von Schmee, before it was shorn.

"Poor 'ittle doggie!"

Two heavy-footed peasant women came lumbering across the stubble. They were the women who had left Dick the dinner basket. Vrow Alys looked up at them and spoke a few sharp words in Flemish or Dutch. What was said Dick did not know. The women drew back with a frightened manner. They answered her sullenly. At a quicker pace they hastened away, glancing uneasily about them.

Presently they were gone, and Vrow Alys arose, dusting grass blades from her skirt. She tucked her fallen yellow curls back of her ears. She looked thoughtfully at the sunset. The sun had half gone down below the horizon. The light of it was red upon her cheeks and lips. For the moment she was facing Dick.

"Lilith! Here, Lilith!" she called softly. "It iss time to return."

Lilith had gone scampering after a grasshopper. Scampering and yelping furiously, showing her nasty little teeth. Here was a game she preferred even to field mice. The grasshopper couldn't bite back.

The grasshopper looked at her contemptuously. He chewed tobacco, and hopped into a hay mound. In an instant the ridiculous poodle had dived headforemost into the hay in pursuit, yelping and slavering and trembling through all her meager body.

It was thus that Dick Fahnestock was betrayed. What von Reuter and the grim dogs of war had failed to find, it was left for Vrow Alys Dervanter and her damned fleabitten cur to find.

"Lilith, come here!"

The woman with the pale green eyes plunged her hand into the hay, and touched Dick on the shoulder.

SHE stood with her hands on her bosom, staring at him silently.

"Well?" he said. "Where do you stand? Yell for the guard, if you're with von Schmee, and I'll strangle your sweet little throat. I've seen you before. It was last night. Tell me, who are you?"

Her eyes darted quickly to right and left.

"Don't you know?" she said.

"I don't know," he said. "Are you K-13?"

Again she answered:

"Don't you know?"

A curious smile grew on her face.

Dick chewed a grass blade.

"I'm the one that's asking questions," he said grimly. "Are you K-13? You look different, somehow."

Her eyes were clouded a moment. Then she smiled, nodding quickly.

"Ah, the peasant girl!" she said. "It

was she you expected to see. Long yellow braids? A dress to the knees, so? But I should not have on the stockings. So, you would recognize me for K-13, eh?"

"That would be more like it," said Dick, glancing at her elegant slim legs.

"Ah, but they are all looking for that peasant girl," said Vrow Alys in a low voice, turning her glance again quickly about her. "It would not be safe, you see? And all day you have been waiting here for K-13—for me?"

"What does it look like I've been doing?" grunted Dick. "Making a non-stop flight to Tokio on the kitchen range? You told me to wait——"

"Of course," she nodded.

"Till you came."

"Of course."

"I'm not built for waiting," said Dick irritably, feeling much less liking for her than he had felt last night. "I crave action. It's been hell lying here. What's going on? Where's the whole Fritz army headed for? You know the game, and I don't. But what's to prevent us from making a break and fighting our way clear somehow? I want to be hopping back and tell the Lady—old Cothaven—that the Huns are on the move."

"You must lie quiet some more," whispered Vrow Alys.

"I've been lying quiet so long I've got blisters on my stomach," Dick growled. "I'm filled with hay dust clean down to the bottom of my toes. There's a couple of armies of man-eating ants have crawled down my neck, and they're fighting the battle of the Marne all over again on my backbone. I'm dry as a petrified horned toad, and some new kind of a chigger with an electric drill for a snout has started boring tunnels through my hide, and I want a chew of tobacco. Far be it from me to interfere with your game, sister. You've got your own epidermis to protect, and you seem to know how to do it. I watched you handling Fritz last night, and it was sweet. I want to say I couldn't have done it better myself if I'd kissed him with a bag of cement. But you told me they almost have you, and you've got to get away. If I wait much longer there won't be anything of me to get away. I'll be only a dinner walking around in the stomachs of all the ants, chiggers, fleas and titmice in Belgium. I'm getting to the stage where I want to climb up on my hind legs and yell. I'm getting irritated.

"You're a swell fighting kid, sister, by what you showed me of your stuff last night. And you've got a head on your shoulders. I suppose my play is to do just what you tell me, though I've never got the habit of taking orders from a woman. But while I'm lying here flat on my breadbasket you'll be dodging the Heinies all alone. And I don't like that. I hopped up here into this nest of rattlesnakes to lend you a hand and help you get away. I may look dumb, but I'm a kind of useful guy to have around you when the fireworks start. Nobody has ever said yet that Big Dick Fahnestock is a coward, or that he couldn't finish what he set out to do."

Vrow Alys Dervanter put her finger to her lips. Again she glanced around her with fleeting haste. The red sunlight was in her eyes. They looked like the eyes of a cat.

"Hush!" she whispered. "Someone is near!"

She moved away softly. Dick buried himself deeper in the hay.

"Be patient!" she whispered. "Lie still!"

Carefully she picked her way off over the ragged stubble. At the last glimpse Dick had of her pink and white face, it was hard as painted china.

"Come, Lilith, 'ittle doggie. It iss time to go home," she was calling softly.

And Dick, watching her walking carefully in her high-heeled slippers, felt a vague inquietude stirring in his mind. She did not seem quite the same as she had in the darkness.

As he moved his hands about in the hay, drawing himself in deeper, a piece of paper rumpled in his grasp. It was a cigaret paper wrapped about a pebble which had been dropped, or flicked, or thrown into the hay mound.

Keep cool, big boy. They haven't got you yet.
K-13

A SLATE-BLUE pigeon with a milk-white breast went soaring high over Oldemonde. On steady wings it beat due south.

There was no other thing visible in the sky. No living thing in the hayfields, either, except grasshoppers that hopped, and flies that droned, and little brown mice with terrified eyes that dashed along squeakingly.

As the twilight came the faint vibration of cannonading that rumbled in the ground grew steadily more pronounced. Southward down the road the camions were still rolling in a long dust cloud. But von Schmee was no longer standing to review them at Oldemonde's gates and take the salute that is the due of Caesar. He had grown tired of the sight of so much cannon fodder. In his headquarters, with telegraph instruments clicking and aides rushing in and out, he was poring over maps.

The sun had gone down, and the pale green twilight of midsummer lay over the world. In the east stars twinkled in a clear sky, and Mars, the red war star, von Schmee's own guiding star, burned like a great tiger eye.

Wind rustled in the hedgerows and through the cedars. It crept across the stubble of the fields, laying bands of silver where it bent the short, yellow-rooted grass. From the west, where the marshes of the Meser lay, Dick Fahnestock saw the figure of a man coming slowly over the hayfields. For a moment the silhouette of him appeared sharp and black against the burning horizon.

Slowly he drew near. He was swinging a fishing rod over his head. It was Oberleutnant Ritter von Reuter of the Prussian Guards. At times he paused in his sauntering, and practiced casts at running mice. Through the fringes of the hay Dick watched him for fifteen minutes.

Von Reuter carried a small string of fish, seven or eight perch, pickerel and sunfish. His meandering way led him in time past Dick's hiding place. For a moment he paused once more, setting his catch down. He made a far cast over the stubble at the fleeting shadow of a mouse. He reeled in, whistling meditatively a bar of Heine's *"Die Lorelei."* Cautiously Dick burrowed himself deeper. He had come to a belief that von Reuter was one of the cleverest and most ruthless of the Germans.

"Die Luft ist kühl, und es dunkelt . . ."

With stormy blue eyes von Reuter glanced toward the west, where a deepening crimson streak still lingered. He glanced toward the north, where the swelling new-mown fields stretched endlessly into the twilight, dotted by innumerable cones of stacked hay. He glanced toward the east, where beyond hedgerows and stone fences the Invincible's regiments were rolling down. He glanced toward the south, where stood the thick cedar wood, and Oldemonde's gray mass above it. He put out his hand and glanced up at the sky, feeling for a drop of rain.

Then suddenly he cast a look down at the hay mound beside him. His nostrils quivered. His hand reached to his Lüger. And there was danger and lightning fury in his dark eyes.

Dick had been peering at the stiff-boned Prussian through a screen of grass. He thought himself sufficiently well hidden. But abruptly von Reuter dropped his fishing rod, and leaped back. His pistol flashed out. He caught up a platoon-leader's whistle that hung around his neck, and blew it wildly.

Whril-whril-whrilloo!

What a damned noise!

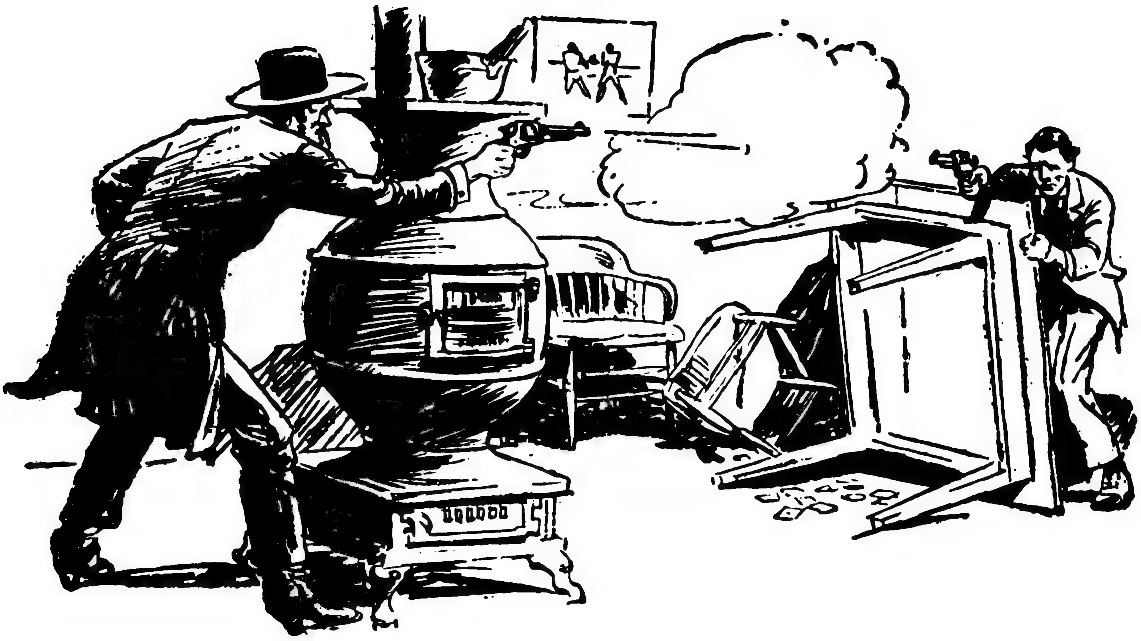
Again, *whril-whril-whrilloo!* He backed a step warily. His blunt blue automatic covered Dick's position.

"Here's your damned spy, soldiers!" he shouted jubilantly. "Lying like a rat in the hay! Come on, boys! Poke him out! Drag him out! We've got him!"

Out from the edges of the cedar wood not many yards away, up from behind hedgerows and from innocuous-appearing hay mounds over the field, dozens of green-clad soldiers appeared instantly.

Dick heaved himself out then, and stood to meet them. They closed up in a ring all about him, with rifles leveled and fixed bayonets.

But Big Dick Fahnestock isn't beaten yet. In the following and concluding chapters he meets and recognizes the great K-13, and shoulder to shoulder they battle for their lives in the midst of the German Army.



The MAN *Who* BURIED *the* UNDERTAKER

A Tale of Strange and Fantastic Humor

By R. E. HAMILTON

THE rain beat sadly on the sod roof and swished on the dead branches of the cottonwoods. Conversation within the bunkhouse languished. The bullwhacker had found an old magazine and stared in admiration at an advertisement on the back cover.

"They's sure a lot of perfessions a man can hang himself onto," he observed. "Providin' he's got the education. Steamfitter, salesman, math'metician, bank president, master plumber—you can be all and any of these by attendin' this here correspondence school. They's more than a hundred things a man can make of himself, according to the advertisement, and it don't even mention hogs and cattle."

The weather had soured the horse wrangler.

"Most perfessions is bad," he said with gloom. "And the others is worse."

"Ye-ah?" asked the bullwhacker. He decided to flatter the horse wrangler; he would be out of tobacco presently. "You've been around considerable and traveled wide. Outside of sheepherdin', what's the worst perfession you ever see?"

"There's some real bum jobs in the Army," replied the horse wrangler, considering. "And the jobs I've seen of separatin' various kinds of city garbage wouldn't appeal to me none. But if there's one job always give me chills to think about, it was bein' an undertaker."

"I knew a undertaker once who had a lot of fun," declared the bullwhacker. "His name was Ike Blue. He wasn't a graduated, licensed, pedigreed undertaker, but he had an office just the same, and he undertook. He undertook for two weeks. At first he had kind of a uncomfortable time, but it ended in a hell of a blowout, with drinks all around."

"I'd like to listen to anything about drinks," said the horse wrangler wistfully. He gathered up the cards.

"All right," said the bullwhacker. "But you asked for it. If you go to sleep on me . . . Sure, I'll have a cigaret."

OTTO SPANGLER and Ike Blue ran a horse ranch south of the Little Big Horn. That was a long time ago. It was way back in the days when you could feed dead cayuse to a tenderfoot and tell him it was buffalo meat, and Settin' Bull was keepin' the rest of the country standin' up. It was the time when, bein' short of Christmas trees and fireworks on the prairie, they used to hang a man out of the courthouse window, regular, every Christmas and Fourth of July.

Ike Blue originally came from Caliente, but Otto Spangler, he hailed from New England. I forget whether it was Maine or Rhode Island, but one of them places. Coming from Boston, you must of known his family? . . . No? Well, maybe they didn't move much in society, bein' undertakers and likely to cast some gloom on a party, if invited.

Yes, the tribe had been in the embalmin' business for generations, father handin' the coffin down to son, as it were. Otto even used to boast his grandpa embalmed George Washington. But Otto was kind of old when I knew him, and like to be imaginative. Anyways, I always heard George Washington died in Virginia, and it ain't likely they'd send 'way up to Maine. . . .

I *am* stickin' to the story. Well, the business goin' always to the oldest son, it finally fell to the uncle of Otto Spangler. This uncle, he didn't have no children. It was a toss-up whether Otto or a cousin would fall heir to the business and the goodwill—if you could call it that.

But Otto was a real young man when suddenly the uncle up and died and left everything to the cousin. Abraham was his name; Cousin Abraham.

Now, they was no hard feelin's shown, Otto bein' somewhat younger than the cousin. And anyways, he thinks he'd rather go West and grow up with the country than stay here and grow up with the cemetery. So he packs his carpet bag and ten dollar vest and watch and chain and hikes out to the open spaces—a terrible adventure in them days.

Somewheres just under the Canada line in Montana he meets up with Ike Blue, who'd suffered losses at solo from the same crooked gambler as himself. And the mutual calamity gets them acquainted and gradually makes them bunkies together. They was such good friends that once, in his liquor, Ike even admits that before he knew Otto well, and was feelin' low about losin' his money, he sat in a poker game with Otto and won ten dollars off of him he hadn't ought, on account of a loose ace he found on the floor. And even though comin' from New England, where they look on such doin's as right serious, Otto forgive Ike, especially when he'd handed back the ten, and shook hands.

As I've said, them two bunked together for numerous years, and finally, when they'd arrived at the age of discretion and first signs of bald spots, they moved out south of the Little Big Horn and opened up a horse ranch there, believin', and rightly, that there was a heap of money to be made out of horseflesh in them early days. And although they quarreled amongst themselves, as lone men will do batchin' on the prairie, it was pokin' death in the ribs for an outsider to say a word against the other in hearin' distance of either.

What'd they look like? Well, folks say Ike Blue was dark and spare lookin', with hollow cheeks and a big gold tooth, whilst Otto was pink faced and good-natured, with bristly yaller hair. Ike was apt to be cantankerous, but Otto, he was usual pretty placid talkin' for a horse rancher, except when someone reworked his brand or fenced off a creek or shot at him, or some such annoyance.

Oh yes, I forgot to add that Ike Blue had fought in the Civil War. At least, he hadn't seen much actual fightin', bein' about fifteen year old in '65 and barely able to tootle a little on the fife; but he was real proud. He'd collected a lot of Civil War soldier buttons and used to sew 'em on all his shirts, and he knew almost as much about the battle of Antietam as some of the fellers that had been there.

Well, they worked the ranch for about ten year and was real successful. They never put on no dog; it was just a ranch. But they acquired seven or eight hundred head of stock and salted a good pile of gold away in the bank of Clementine, to say nothin' of what was cached under—however, I'll explain that later.

AFTER ten year, one summer's day they comes a *rat-tat* on the cabin door. Ike Blue sticks out his head, and there on the stoop he sees standin' a feller in black store clothes and a collar and tie. He carries a bag. He's a pale, round feller and he holds his chin sunk into his collar so that he has to look up at Ike under his eyebrows. Ike don't fancy him none, but——

"Howdy," he says. For hospitality is the ante in the game of social ettyketty in them days. "Won't you step in? And what's your name, stranger?"

"Spangler's my name," says the stranger, acceptin' the hospitality prompt. "Spangler" he repeats, somewhat louder.

And Ike jumps.

"What?" says Otto, comin' out of the kitchen. "Who says Spangler? Well, if it aint my Cousin Abraham from Connecticut!" Or maybe it was Maine. And he grabs his hands. "Set right down, Abraham, and how's the undertakin' business?"

Well, it develops that the undertaker trade is poorly; in fact Abraham Spangler's business has had to shut down and sort of go into the hands of a receiver. It ain't exactly the kind of receivin' I'd hanker for, but tastes differ. And here's Abraham come West to seek his fortune.

Well, Otto's sorry to hear about that. The business has been in the family a long time. But, misfortunes will happen. Is Abraham figurin' on remainin' here around?

Ike Blue seen Cousin Abraham lookin' about the ranch, at the two bare rooms and the stark lookin' lean-to's and corrals behind the house, and at the big bunch of horses grazin' out on the benches, and he seen Abraham's shoulders shrug jest a little. It looks like a place where they's lots of work to be done and no feather beds.

No, Cousin Abraham allows, he's goin' out on the Coast and set up business there, but he'll be glad to visit Cousin Otto a few days if Cousin Otto can see fit to put him up.

Sure! Otto's tickled to death to see home folks.

"Stay a month, Abraham."

So he kills a fatted fryer and takes down a ham that him and Ike had agreed to save for Christmas, and he fries potatoes and bacon and beartrack, and he spills their last dried apricots out of the bag into a pie. He swaps talk about the old home from dawn to sundown until Ike feels a stranger in his own house and goes to set out on the stoop with the chickens.

One time when Otto's tongue is all lubricated up he even tells the cousin about Ike's misdeed at poker with that loose ace, and how he, Otto, forgive that lowdown stunt.

Now that was only human nature. They's a lot of us can do noble acks, but there's few that don't relish a little credit and publicity for them. However, Otto's tellin' on him that way made Ike feel more sad and orphanlike than ever, and the cousin looked over his nose at him until he begin to think he was a utter worm.

But at last, one evening, the cousin allows that next morning he'd better be shakin' up the dust on the trail west, though it's a fifteen mile walk to Clementine.

So bein' as how nothin's too good for the guest, Otto must go out on the range and wrangle one of their good, black three year olds, which Ike says would have fetched thirty dollars in the fall, and he gives it to this cousin. Otto also says he'll ride into Clementine with Abraham to start him on his journey. Don't Ike want to go along?

But Ike he declines. He's afraid his joy at news of the guest's departure will show up on him, which wouldn't be polite to the guest. So he remembers suddenly he has to chase some horses from a neighbor's waterhole before they comes home with reworked brands on the seats of their pants, and he rides away. He rides east, grinnin' broad. Lookin' around once, and seein' Otto escortin' Abraham three mile down the trail to Clementine, he lets out a cheer like a Piute war holler.

It was nightfall when Ike rode home. From afar he seen the light from the shack a-gleamin' cheerful, indicatin' Otto's come back alone, and he could have bust out singin'. He lopes up, all smilin' and gay, like a knight of old returnin' to his lady love. But when he gets as far as the corrals he sees somethin's amiss. In the dusk, there's Otto a-squattin' out on the back stoop. And his rifle is cocked in front of him.

Wha-a-ang! the rifles sings out, and would of sent a bullet into Ike's innards only the horse jumped sideways and the lead hit the cistern instead.

Ike thinks Otto's going crazy, like a sheepherder. He dives into the dugout where they kept their grub supplies, braces the door and pulls a half dozen flour sacks around him.

Otto, outside, shoots for half an hour into the flour before Ike can make him reason. Finally——

"You're a ravin' fool," he sings out, exasperated.

"I've been," shouts back Otto, "but I ain't no more. You can cheat me once and get away with it. But not twice."

Wha-a-ang!

"What the hell have I done?" hollers Ike.

"I've jest dug into our cache for some tobacco," hollers Otto, "and I seen what I saw."

Wha-a-ang!

The cache is where they kept all their tobacco and about a thousand dollars, under loose boards in the kitchen floor. For Otto has figured out that not only should they have some money on hand, but that banks is known to fail and they oughtn't to leave all their cash in Clementine. And it bein' his idea, Otto has charge of this bullion, dolin' it out when needful.

Ike gradually sees light.

"You mean to say someone's been tamperin' with the cache? Stop that shootin' and use your mouth a little."

"Money's all gone, and you know it," yells Otto. "Ye dirty little sheep tick!"

"Then," hollers Ike, "by Gawd, it's your own cousin took it. You better muzzle your gun and get after him."

"My cousin," babbles Otto, "he's a good man. He comes from Massachusetts. (Maybe it was Rhode Island.) He warned me agi'n you. He knew a skunk when he saw one."

Wha-a-ang!

"Anyways, in the cache hole I found a Civil War button off your shirt cuff, where you scraped it agi'n the boards drawin' out the money."

Ike Blue lays there and studies. He knows there's a Civil War button off his shirt cuff; he'd noticed it that morning and stuck a safety-pin to hold it. He reaches out a hand stealthy and lights a match to see.

"Otto," he says, "my button's missin', I admit that, but I swear I never been near your cache. Now, on my cuff I can also see a big bunch of thread that held the button, and it ain't raveled out, it's *cut!* So I ask you, look on that button. If they's a bunch of thread still in it, ain't that thread been cut?"

There's silence for a minute outside the dugout door. Finally:

"It looks kind of cut. What of it?"

"Well," says Ike, "a man that's thievin' don't go around cuttin' off his buttons to leave as evidence. Last night my shirt and pants hung over a chair right next to your'n and your cousin's. 'Twas easy enough for a certain thievin' scoundrel from Massachusetts, whose name delicacy forbids me to mention, to cut off a button and place it where he wanted it, for his own vile purpose."

Outside the dugout they was a long silence this time.

Finally:

"Come out, if yo're able," says Otto. "I'll look into this."

Ike crawls out, kind of apprehensive, and shows his cuff, and the two goes into the house together.

They pulls up the boards and there's nothing, not a hair to identify the thief. Ike Blue runs his hand down, and all he finds is a loose piece of pine log that had fell in the hole some time ago. They's a lump of soft rosin on this board and he holds it to the light. Then he hollers:

"Whoever run his hand down after the money," he says, "put his thumb on this rosin. They's a thumbprint."

Otto goes and gets a bar of softish soap.

"Put your thumbs in this," he orders, and Ike done so, right willing.

They compared prints and there weren't no resemblance whatsoever, even under a old reading glass they owned. Neither was the thumbprint Otto's.

"Hope yo're satisfied," says Ike, gettin' mad. "Only a couple sacks of flour stood between me and the jasper walls this night." And he clumps off to bed and don't speak to Otto for thirty-six hours.

Otto, he studies and studies. He recalls the ham and apricots, the bacon and chicken, the good three year old horse, to say nothin' of a old but usable saddle, and each thing he thinks of makes him madder. He thinks of how he plugged lead at his old partner, and that makes him maddest of all.

By sunup he's steamin' fit to blow his lid off. He fetches his Winchester, saddles his mare and rides into Clementine. But the cousin is gone long ago, nobody recalls by what trail, but lopin' along right fast on his good horse, and there's nothin' for Otto to do but to go back home and ask forgiveness, which he done.

WELL, this setback to their fortunes didn't last forever. The dollars still come rollin' in, a few at a time, and rememberin' their sad experience they salted them all away in the banks. And this lasted ten more year until the land begun to be opened to homesteaders and the price of horseflesh went down.

Ike Blue at this time was approaching sixty year old, and he allowed he'd forked a horse so long he couldn't set comfortable in a chair unless he straddled it back to front. He said he was that calloused he was bullet proof. He said he'd rid the range so long that some day he'd wake up and find out he was a centaur—which is a half man, half bronc. And he could think up a lot of occasions when that condition would be right inconvenient.

He counted up his mazuma and he had enough money to live on for the rest of his life, providin' he only ordered half portions of wine, women and song. So what was the use of workin' forever, like a beast of the fields? From now on he was goin' to be a lily of the fields and rope not, neither would he brand, and not even a traveling salesman in all his glory was going to be arrayed like one of him.

Which same he done, and commenced to enjoy himself thorough. And they was just one fly in his whisky. For after they'd got rid of their horses and sold their ranch to a Polack who was expectin' to grow flax, and after they'd moved into Clementine and took up rooms in the Palace-Bellevue Hotel, Otto Spangler—who was the goodnaturedest of the two and you'd think would be content anywheres, let alone in all this grandeur—begin to get restless eyed. He took to wanderin' about town, lookin' in the store windows and meetin' all the trains, and one day he announced to Ike Blue that he was goin' to take up a trade.

"A trade!" says Ike. "You're crazy. What kind of a trade do you know anything about?"

"Undertakin'," says Otto.

Well, I reckon it was in the blood. Here a man had been ranchin' or gamblin' half his life, and the first opportunity he had spare time on his hands, he up and follows the footsteps of his forefathers. Undertakin'!

Ike argued and pleaded, but nothin' would serve. The more he talked the less Otto listened. Otto bought all the newspapers in the state, studyin' up different localities, and he talked to all the drummers that come to town. Finally, he announced to Ike that the time had come for them to say good-by, unless Ike would consent to go along too. For he, Otto Spangler, was goin' to set up a undertakin' parlor in the city of Porcupine, a thrivin' metrop'lis of thirteen hundred souls, situated right along the Great Northern Railroad.

Well, Ike said he took it real hard that Otto was bound to go, but he'd never held much interest in gentlemen that had passed beyond, and at his time of life he thought it was too late to begin. Otto and him would come mooch off each other frequent, and Ike would always keep a spare bed made up in his room at the Palace-Bellevue against the time when Otto would retire from the business; but he, Ike, wa'n't goin' to move into no undertakin' parlor.

So they stood there, gulpin' and makin' gratin' noises in their tonsils, and lookin' at each other embarrassed until Otto turned his back, grabbed his grips without a word, and hotfooted it after Number Four.

Porcupine had been a cattle town in the early days, and they was still chutes and stockyards east of town, and some shippin' done. It had been kind of wide open then, with plenty shootin'; in fact very few folks in the cemetery was there without their boots on. The town had never bothered about embalmin' and such luxuries, but when they heard there was a undertaker comin' to set up quarters there they was real pleased, takin' it as a sign of progress. They figgered that the town was right boomin' and would some day be within five thousand or so of the population of Great Falls, and they talked of puttin' an addition on the schoolhouse.

Otto took up lodgin's in Porcupine. He hung out his shingle and bought some stock in trade. He wrote Ike that he was very comfortable and doin' well, and had read up and freshened his mind considerable in regard to his work. When was Ike comin' to visit him?

Well, Ike Blue had never been on a train in his life, and had no hankerin' to try it. So he kept puttin' off and puttin' off his visit until at last something happened that made him wish he'd not only gone before, but that he'd never let Otto out of his sight.

"If I'd of been with him," he hollered, pacing up and down the lobby of the Palace-Bellevue until the guests was dizzy, and gnashing his gold tooth and rumplin' his hair, "if I'd of been there with him it wouldn't of happened. Otto Spangler ain't got the sense of a five year child. He oughtn't to be out without a clothesline tied onto him. First time he got out of my earshot, look what the fool up and done!"

For Otto had got himself married!

It was a hasher in the Bright Eagle Café he'd teamed up with, and he was real pleased. 'Twas said at first they had slight trouble, on account of he was a better cook and bedmaker than her, havin' bached so long on the ranch. But that was smoothed over. In time all was happy except Ike Blue, who wouldn't of gone near the place now for five hundred dollars gold.

SIX months passed. Then winter come, and the spring round-up. The irrigation ditches was all speckled with wild sunflowers, but they was no word from Otto. And then, when fair time come and went and the remudas had streamed back to the ranches and the first loads of wheat had been hauled to town, a letter arrives, and a package.

Ike opens the package first, and here's a suit of clothes, more or less his size, but black as a horsethief's conscience.

Ike, since he'd retired, had run to checks and plaids and occasionally henna color hair pants, and he ain't impressed. He turns to the letter.

Dear Ike:
You often said you was my friend, and if so I sure need you now. Put on this suit of clothes and come down here. You gotta be here by the ninth, anyways.
Otto

Ike hops down to the telegraph office and wires back three words:

WHERE'S THAT WOMAN

Back comes the answer:

BUTTE

And Ike wires:

I'LL ARRIVE BY THE NINTH—STOP—SATURDAY—STOP—BUT I AIN'T ARRIVING BY NO TRAIN

He goes home and packs the black suit into a saddle roll with some other duds, he saddles up one good horse and leads another, and he sets out to ride all the way to Porcupine. He'd never sent nor received no telegrams before, and his nerves was too unstrung to tackle a train on top of that excitement.

He arrives in Porcupine late one night. His horses is lame and Ike's covered with what looks like half the dust of the Roosevelt trail, but the black suit is kept clean and neat inside the saddle roll.

He inquires and finds a trim frame house right in the middle of town, so he hitches the horses and knocks. Otto come out and hauls him in and slams the door. He's pale and strained lookin' and though he's right glad to see Ike, Ike can see he's got something on his mind.

"For Gawd's sakes," says Otto, "put on them black clothes, will you? And hide them henna color chaps and plaid shirt."

Ike finds himself thrust into a bedroom, and the first thing he knows he's standing in his underwear and Otto is firing the black clothes at him. Ike's scairt to death the missis will come in.

Otto keeps assuring him she's in Butte, but Ike says:

"How can you tell? No woman ever done what she's expected. You think they're a thousand miles away pickin' flowers and suddenly they walk in the back door and hit you on the head with a meat ax."

He puts on the black clothes, however, and he looks more rangy and pale than ever. Otto brightens right up, seein' the effect.

"You'll do fine," he says.

"Fine for what?" asks Ike, frightened.

"From now on, for two weeks," says Otto, "you're an undertaker."

Ike makes a grab for the door, but Otto hauls him back and sets him in a chair. From where he sets, Ike can look out the window and he can see his horse still saddled and bridled and ready to get away, and he says afterwards it was the saddest sight he ever see.

"Look-a here," says Otto. "Ain't you my best friend and partner? Ain't you . . . " And here he goes on recitin' all the trials and joys them two had gone through together, until Ike, scairt as he was, the tears come to his eyes.

Then, before he can speak, Otto plunges into his plan.

It seems that Mrs. Spangler was makin' a important visit to her folks down to Butte. And that very afternoon, before Ike loped into town, Otto he'd got a wire sayin' that the son an' heir had arrived and had yaller hair like his paw.

Otto, he was ridin' on top of the world. But he was likewise nervous as a witch, and he'd been champin' at the bit for weeks and days to get to Butte hisself.

"Well," says Ike, "this ain't nothin' to get excited over. Why don't you go? And what the hell has it got to do with me, I'd like to know. Anybody'd think——"

"That's it," says Otto. And here he explained that when he contracted for the undertakin' job in Porcupine he contracted for to remain in the city. It was needful for him to be on hand in case of emergency. The Porcupine folks relied on him. If he went and left them flat, they was apt to lose confidence and ship their business to Big Elder or Great Falls or some place.

He couldn't get a substitute; they was none handy to come away off here to Porcupine. Besides, he hadn't been in the business long enough to meet any of his colleagues. Moreover, the undertakers and coroners in this section of the state was sufferin' from a epidemic of professional jealousy and wouldn't scarcely speak to each other if they passed on the street, let alone help each other out of a difficulty. So he'd wrote to his best friend and pal, the one person to whom a man might turn in trouble, etc., etc. And his best friend must make believe he's an undertaker for two weeks so the people won't think they's abandoned.

"Yes," says Ike. "This is all very nice and brotherly love, and so on. But what if someone kicks off after you're gone and I have to plant him?"

"They won't nobody kick off," says Otto. "They's only been three people die since I don't know when, and they was sickly. They ain't no one in Porcupine with even a cold. Moreover, the town's been peaceful ever since it went into wheat. Besides, I'll only be gone two weeks."

Well, it was no use to argue. The next morning Otto called in one or two folks and introduced Mr. Blue, the temporary undertaker, and after that he caught the noon train and left for Butte.

IKE BLUE was a miserable man. He stayed upstairs, fearin' to go down. What if he should stumble into a room that contained undertakin' fixin's and coffins and such? He walked back and forth from bedroom to bedroom, and everything was so neat and clean it made him nervous. He got a lot of newspapers and spread them on the bed for fear he'd wrinkle something; and he laid down on them, but he couldn't sleep.

He kept listenin' for footsteps. Outside on the street he heard two men approach, carryin' something heavy, but when he got up, all gooseflesh, to see, it was only a big roll of tar paper, and he laid down again. He kept thinkin' someone might sneak up and place a body on the front porch, and at four in the afternoon he went down to make sure they hadn't. When he opened the door he discovered what a nice day it was and he took courage to step out.

It was a nice flourishin' little town, this Porcupine, with a Main Street and plenty people abroad. A block away they was a saloon called Jake's Joint, and Ike went in and had two good slugs of whisky. He begin to feel improved. Someone says, "There's the new undertaker," and he set up drinks for the crowd, intendin' to build goodwill for Otto's business. He sets up drinks three times and the people takes to him right from the start and says they's pleased to meet him.

But all the time he was under a strain. Jest when the party was gettin' hilarious and someone tells a story that reminds him of a good one, he'd open his mouth to narrate it and suddenly remember he was a undertaker. He even didn't dast sing. By and by he wanders into the back room and finds a pile of pictures. You couldn't hardly say they was refined pictures, but they was real colorful. Some of the ladies had dimples. He buys them off of Jake, who run the Joint, and he buys a dozen bottles with dimples in them too, to match the ladies. Then he goes home.

With the pictures and the bottles spread around, and with his saddle and his chaps hangin' to pegs, his bedroom begins to look a little human. He takes heart and rips the elegant dewdads off of the bed, and then he sleeps sound and sweet under his old Injun blanket.

The next day his mouth is kind of flannel tastin', but he ain't so depressed and he fares forth to a restaurant for food. He's jest wadin' into a tasty mess of bacon and eggs when he's attracted to people talkin' at the next table.

"Gawd," says one, "it's terrible!"

"It's worse than that," says another.

"They may be twenty dead before nightfall," says a third.

Ike puts down the bacon and eggs. He says afterwards he's never been able to regard 'em since with quite his former enthusiasm. He watches 'em get all cold and still and jellied-like, an' he shudders. He gets up and goes over to the other table.

"What the hell are you fellers talkin' about?" he asks.

"Man, ain't you heard?" they cries. "Why, smallpox has broke out west of town. The shanties is full of it. It'll spread like wildfire."

Ike walks out. For him, the day seems all dark and desolate and fearsome. The wind comin' in from the prairie sounds mean and raw, an' a cloud draws over the sun. He goes home and gets that saddle off the nail. He throws it over his horse, and he don't wait to change his clothes or nothing; black suit and all he hits it up a fast clip down Main Street to the first road out of town. He almost runs over a black baby buggy. It looks to him like a child's coffin, and he gallops around a corner on two legs, the pack pony a-flyin' after. He hears a little boy yell:

"There goes the undertaker. Ride 'em, undertaker!"

All the while he's thinkin', "What'll Otto say? A nice friend I am." And all the while he's answerin' to himself, "He can't expect me to bury a whole plague."

Presently he finds hisself ridin' by a lot of shanties, and he's horrified to realize he's reached the west of town, where the smallpox is. Someone will come out grabbin' him and make him bury their wives and children, sure. He slows the horse to turn, and jest then he recognizes the Porcupine doctor, comin' toward him. He gives himself up for lost.

"How many dead, so far?" he croaks, dismountin'.

The town doctor looks at him. Then he begins to laff and laff. He laffs so hard he has to set down by the road in some tumbleweed.

"I never seen an undertaker until now that come before he was sent for," he says. "I reckon the town better discharge Mister Spangler and hire you instead, you're that enterprisin'. Hell's bells, man, it ain't smallpox these folks have, it's chickenpox! Come on. Let's go back to town and have a drink."

Nevertheless, Ike Blue's nerves is shaken. When he gets back to town he wires Otto:

CAN'T YOU COME HOME TOMORROW

But Otto replies:

TWO WEEKS AIN'T UP YET

And there he is.

WELL, the days drag by somehow. Ike crosses them off the calendar and wipes the sweat off of his brow the same time. He patronizes Jake's Joint considerable and folks get to talkin' what a nice sociable chap the new undertaker is and how good he holds his liquor. Most of the nights he lays and listens for the slow tread of marchin' feet, but they never come. On two occasions he manages to fall into the state where he has to be carried home from the Joint and put to bed, and he wakes up in the morning real relieved.

Alas, as the story books say, on the seventh day of his visit, Lady Trouble come ridin' in, on a black saddle blanket and a skeleton horse. It happens this way:

He's entertainin' two or three friends in his room upstairs among the pictures an' the bottles, an' he's maybe makin' some hilarity, when they's the sound of footsteps in the hall, and there in the doorway stands a minister. He's a kindly lookin' minister with a white beard, but Ike says that if he'd had buck teeth and a cauliflower ear he couldn't of looked any worse to him. For Ike knows he's going to speak words of doom.

"There's a poor Indian that's passed beyond," says the minister. "His bereaved people have come to me to see that he has Christian burial. He lies below."

His voice is mournful as the tollin' of church bells, and silence fell over that happy party like black rust over forty acre of wheat.

Ike goes down, and his friends comes down after him, some of them stumblin' a little; and sure enough, the parlor is full of breeds. One of them is dead, all right, and layin' in state on a table.

The people is millin' round, but dazed as he is Ike can see that these breed relatives inclines more to the white than to the Injun side of the family tree, and in fact there's a couple pure whites mixed in with 'em. That accounts for the Christian burial idea, he surmises. The widow, she's all swelled up with importance and has it arranged that they's to be a grand funeral, with hired singin' an' bearers an' posies an' a hundreds yards of crape.

After a while the minister sends the relatives all home, sayin' that Brother Blue must now make the necessary arrangements, and Ike, he shivers in his cowhide boots.

The old minister puts his hand on Ike's shoulder, and Ike jumps like it was the touch of death. This parson is about to go along home too, and leave Ike alone with the trouble he brought.

"And I must tell you," says he. "This poor man, Joe Bull-In-The-Grass, though married into a breed family, is the son of a full blood Crow Indian squaw. Unhappily, never having been converted, she is adverse to anything but regulation Crow burial for her son. If she should come to you, do not, I beg you, allow her to dissuade you or take away the body."

He goes home, rubbin' his hands.

Ike sets down and looks at that Injun. He groans out loud, and then of course he jumps, thinkin' it was the corpse groaned. He gets up and peeks into the back room. He sees a lot of strange bottles, little and big, and a bunch of things in the corner that might be coffins, and he closes the door in a hurry.

Twilight's comin' on. He wishes the breed wa'n't so dead-lookin'. He gets up and looks out the window, and across the street he sees a fat squaw go by in a purple shawl and a pink calico dress, starin' hard at the house. Away down the street there's a horse and wagon tied to the hitchin' pole before the post office, and in the wagon there sits two young full blood bucks that looks like they might be her sons. One of them turns around also and stares at the house.

Ike, he goes to the front door, tiptoe, tiptoe. He opens the door, gentle as can be, and then he retires, tiptoe, tiptoe, upstairs to listen. He don't hear a sound. In thirty minutes he goes down again and opens the door, halfway this time. It's pitch dark now, about seven o'clock at night. Still, nothing happens. He waits another half hour, and then he goes down and flings the door wide, likewise he pins a dollar bill onto the vest of the corpse and puts out the porch light.

Once, while he is waitin' upstairs, he thinks he hears a sort of scufflin', shovin' sound, but he don't detect no footsteps. Nevertheless, he's hopeful. He waits a full hour before venturin' down, and then, tryin' to think up some prayer to say an' hopin' agi'n hope, he peeks in the parlor.

By gosh, the Injun's gone, dollar bill and all!

Ike Blue, he jumps up in the air and lets out a glad war whoop until the bric-of-brac dances on the shelves. He does a Mexican clog dance he learned in his youth in Caliente, and he runs up to his bedroom and finishes a dimpled quart bottle that's more than half full.

Then he goes out and breaks the sad news to the old minister that, despite all precautions, once when he left the room to get a drink of water, them heathen, rascal, full blooded Crow Injuns have snuk in and stole the corpse.

WELL, the incident of the dead breed is the closest shave yet. Ike thinks that his heart ain't what it used to be, and he don't know how many of them kind of shocks it will live over. Maybe when Otto comes home he'll find some business he didn't expect, and it'll be layin' upstairs in the guest bedroom.

He packs himself over to Jake's Joint to seek forgetfulness and to ease his nerves, and he remains there from openin' time to after midnight. He even has his mail brought there, also a telegram from Otto.

He opens this telegram all eager and excited, for he thinks:

"Here he'll say maybe that he's comin' home early."

But all Otto writes is:

BABY WEIGHS EIGHT AND
FIVE-SIXTHS POUNDS—STOP—
HAVE NAMED HIM AFTER YOU

"That's rank scandal," snorts Ike.

Well, it gets to be four days from the time Otto is due back, and Ike thinks that maybe he can last that long. If any business should come in now, it could really almost wait for the regular undertaker. He sets down in Jake's to a friendly game of stud with some of his Porcupine acquaintances, and he says that actually, for the first time since his visit, he really almost enjoyed hisself.

They was settin' in the back room, and it bein' fallish weather they was a comfortable fire burnin' in the box-stove. Out the window he could see the sun—a-settin' early, for Porcupine is considerable north—a-glowin' all red and handsome in the west and a-sinkin' down behind Tim Gilligan's hog ranch, black against the sky. Ike thinks as how it's the first time he's been able to realize they's anything beautiful in the world for days and days.

They ain't no sound but the peaceful slappin' of cards on the oilcloth and the sound of "Raise yuh ten," "Call yuh, ye damned fool." It was right lazy and pleasant.

After a while he hears Jake talkin' casual to someone in the front room, and he thinks maybe the feller will come in after a while and set in his place, while he goes out for chow. But jest then he has a run of luck and forgets about leavin'.

Suddenly his ears pricks up a little, for he hears Jake say, "Spangler," and "Butte." But people is always inquirin' friendlylike when will Otto come back, and though at first it used to give Ike a turn, thinkin' they had a job for him on their hands, he'd got used to it now.

In a few minutes, jest when Ike had drawed to the port side of a straight, Jake come out back leadin' the stranger, and he's sayin':

"This is his partner, Ike Blue."

"All business contracted now is goin' to await the return of Mister Spangler," Ike sings out rapid, for he's memorized that speech today.

"I ain't got no business for Otto," says the stranger. And then he looks Ike over, from boots to bald spot.

"Hell!" he hollers out suddenly. "You ain't no undertaker."

Ike jumps to his feet so fast the table falls down and his brand new straight is spilled with the chips on the floor.

"That's a fightin' insinuation," he hollers, and feels for his gun. But the gun ain't there, for he's still wearin' his undertaker clothes.

The stranger stands there, his chin sunk into his collar, lookin' up at him over his nose, and in spite of marks of age, Ike Blue recognizes him, all right. It's that crooked Abraham, cousin of Otto Spangler, the one that done him dirt years ago. Once more he's found where Otto lives and is come to visit him.

"You ain't no undertaker," repeats that cousin. "Where's your license? Back in New Hampshire"—or maybe it was Rhode Island—"it's agi'n the law to practice without a license, and I reckon it's that way in Montana. Folks," he says to the men who's crowdin' around, "this man's a-deceivin' of you. I knew him ten year ago or more, and he wa'n't nothin' but a horse rancher. He's a-deceivin' of you. He's a liar."

"You're a great one to talk of deceivin' and morals," says Ike. "You who's a thief and absconder."

"Thief yourself," says Cousin Abraham. "Card sharp. Don't play with him, gentlemen. I know of a time he slipped an ace into his hand and cheated his best friend."

"He wa'n't my best friend at the time," says Ike. "And, anyways, I paid it back. And after all—oh shut up! Where the hell is my gun?"

They've made so much noise by now that all the people from the front room of Jake's Joint is in here, and a couple from the sidewalk too.

"I wouldn't take such accusations, Mister Blue," says a pair of men which has stood up to Ike's treat so many times that Ike could murder widows and orphans and they'd swear it was self-defense.

At that, half a dozen old-timers, who's been more or less stagnatin' since the town went into wheat and respectability, wakes up, and smellin' a shootin' in the air, lets out a couple cheers.

Ike looks over this Cousin Abraham, and despite his excitement Ike's a good judge of character. He observes a jail pallor on this cousin, an' a twitch to his mouth an' a nervous flicker to his eyes, and he thinks:

"This feller's been livin' outside the law, or I'm a liar. Likely enough he packs a gun."

He never takes his eyes from Cousin Abraham, but he says:

"Somebody run home and get my .45. It's hangin' in the holster right over my hair pants, in my bedroom at Otto's."

"Hey," says Jake. "No shootin' in the Joint. Outside, if you wanta shoot." An' he goes across the room, shovin' an' pushin' as if to move the people outdoors. But in the confusion which ensues he shoves a gun of his own into Ike's hand, with no one watchin'. For Jake, who run the Joint, is kind of spoilin' for a fight, too, and now and then hankers for the good old cattle days. Besides, it'll take some minutes for a messenger to get to Otto's and back; and he don't like to see anyone shot which ain't prepared. Jake is a gentleman.

The bystanders, not wishin' to lose the fun, don't make a move to go out, despite the half hearted shovin' of Jake, but they backs against the wall and watches.

THE sun goes down and they's no light in the room but from the stove. Up above, hangin' about eighteen feet—for this is a one story shack with a high ceilin'—they's one of these great big gasoline lamps, hangin' by a heavy steel wire, the kind that could light up the whole prairie. But no one dares haul it down and light it for fear the shootin' might start and catch 'em unawares.

Ike, he kind of gulps. But he looks hard at this cousin and thinks of that long ago day in the shack, and of Otto's misused hospitality, and of how, he, Ike, lay half an hour under the flour sacks; and he gets more and more mad. Here's the one man in the world he holds a grudge against; but it's a grudge with hoofs and horns an' standin' hair.

"Why, this jailbird," he says to the audience, "this lowdown, crawlin', stinkin' polecat, up and robbed his own kin of a thousand dollars and he tried to leave the blame on someone else. And I can prove it. I got his thumbprint, I——"

He jumps to one side, and all the people flattens out agi'n the wall and crawls under tables; for Cousin Abraham shoots.

The bullet goes out the window. And then the cousin is real surprised, for Ike shoots back; though the shot only goes through the door into the bar and busts some glass.

"Hell, they're rotten shots," says an oldtimer. "I've knowed Wild Bill Hicock and Nevada Billy Mayfield, and both of them would turn over in their graves and be sick at their stomachs if they could look in on this bum shootin'."

Cousin Abraham fires again and hits the stove, and Ike Blue fires and plugs a bystander in the pants. Cousin Abraham hits the window again and Ike peppers the pictures on the walls in spots that make them look more indecent than ever. They both has to stop and reload; then they shoots again. Ike is now behind the stove, and Cousin Abraham is in the middle of the room, behind the overturned poker table. They shoots and shoots and a couple of more bystanders is nicked in sections that ain't particularly vital. And then it warms up, for Ike gets cousin in the left leg, which was stickin' out behind the table.

"Yeah," cheers an old sheepherder who was about ready to go home in disgust. "Now get some action!"

And egged on like that, cousin aims and hits Ike in the right wrist, just as he is firin' about the eighteenth shot.

Ike ain't wounded deep, but naturally throws up his arm and his pistol is fired into the air.

There's a vicious soundin' swish and a turrible crash. The room is suddenly full of busted glass and the smell of gasoline. For I'm a sheep tick if that wild bullet didn't sever the wire that holds up the gasoline lamp, and down it comes, smash, right on the head of Cousin Abraham.

The bystanders by the walls sort of unflattens themselves and ventures into the middle of the room. Jake who run the Joint goes over and lifts up Cousin Abraham.

"Hats off, fellers," he says. "The stranger's cashed in. That gasoline lamp fractured his skull. You win, Mister Blue."

The audience takes off their hats, in respect to the corpse, but some of them likewise throws them into the air and cheers the winner. Ike, he straightens up from behind the stove and takes a deep breath and hands the gun back to Jake. He shoots his cuffs and rearranges his tie, and over his old saddle colored face they spreads a smile that would 'a' done credit to a angel cherub up in heaven.

"Why, whatcha thinkin' of, Mister Undertaker?" says the sheepherder.

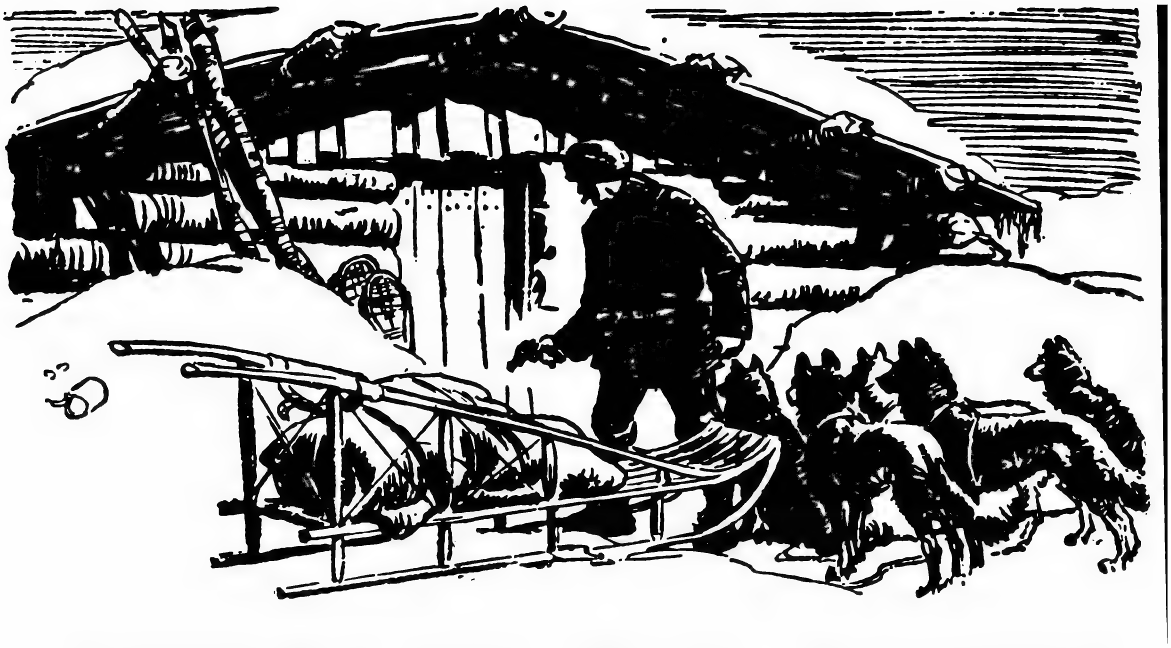
"I'll show you what I'm a-thinkin' of," says Ike.

And he did. He give the most elegant

funeral the town ever had. They was foldin' chairs an' Sam Small's band an' singin' an' dancin'. They was strong drinks an' weak speeches an' ten kinds of food. Ike Blue says if he'd only had more notice he'd of arranged for a barbecue. He was the master of ceremonies, Ike was.

But 'twas in the arrangement of Exhibit A that Ike did himself most proud—after a little private comparison with a dried up piece of rosin he kept in an old match box. With flowers and a dress suit he done a masterly piece of work on Cousin Abraham, and folks said they never seen no one take such a real enjoyment out of his art. They said anyone who give any credence to the stranger's insinuations need only to look at this here example of technique.

In the next issue there will be another unusual Western story, this time a novelette of exciting adventure and high good humor—"The Dude Ranch Mystery", by E. S. Pladwell.



OUT OF HIS OWN MOUTH

At the End of the Long White Trail of the Mounted

By SEWELL PEASLEE WRIGHT

CORPORAL BERKHEAD of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police gave a soft whistle of surprise. His dogs, squatting in the trail behind him, pricked up their ears and glanced up inquiringly. Then they resumed their tasks of biting out the ice balls from between their claws and pads.

Berkhead turned around and looked back over his trail. He could follow it for a long distance, winding down the hill, across a dreary stretch of muskeg, even out onto the lake. The sun was low, making the trail a broad tape of shadow that gradually dwindled into a mere thread, finally to disappear on the patterned surface of the lake.

"He picked a good place," admitted Berkhead as he turned back and studied the unexpected tracks in the snow. "From here he could see me two, maybe three hours away. Wonderful place for a lookout. God only knows where he is by now!"

The thought that Gaston Mariette, wanted for a brutal and cold-blooded murder, might be hiding behind one of the snow shrouded trees, with rifle ready, did not even occur to Berkhead. There was still a trail ahead, and it was the trail of the man he had come to get. The fact that the man knew now that the hand of the Law was very near, that his life was in jeopardy, did not worry Berkhead.

It was nearly dusk, but he could still follow the trail for an hour; perhaps two hours. And two hours, an hour even, now that Mariette knew the policeman was close, might mean the difference between a short trail and a long one.

"Come on, pups," he called to his dogs. Great tawny huskies, they were; and Berkhead took a peculiar pride in them. They had a bitter sort of stamina, a perverse, savage loyalty, that Berkhead loved and understood. They growled and snapped when he harnessed them in the morning, but they would pull until they dropped dead in their traces rather than lay down on their job.

As Berkhead pushed on he quickly reviewed what he knew of the man he was following. Automatically his eyes sifted the bush ahead, alert for any sign of treachery, of lurking danger.

There wasn't much of interest about Gaston Mariette. He was a breed; half French, half Cree, wholly vicious. Berkhead knew a hundred others like him. Chance, circumstances, opportunity, provocation—given one of these four things and any of the hundred would do what Mariette had done.

It was a sordid enough affair, involving a squaw belonging to a no good white man by the name of Ribber. There had been some drinks, some words, and some shooting. Mariette had shot down the unarmed Ribber and then, sobering up suddenly, had struck for the bush.

When Berkhead picked up the trail it was better than three days old. He soon learned that Mariette was no novice as a musher; his camps were nearly as far apart as Berkhead's own, and Berkhead could stretch a day's trail as far as any man on the Force. Naturally, it had been a long trail.

Mariette knew his country. He picked his route carefully, skilfully, making no mistake, bearing always to the north and east, as though he had a definite objective in mind. Gradually the idea had formed in Berkhead's mind that perhaps Mariette did have a definite objective. Perhaps, he had some friends, who, so deep in the silence and the loneliness of the bush, might not fear the law of the Redcoats. Berkhead's eyes lit up for a moment. Perhaps there would be a fight. There is nothing like a fight to make one forget the weariness of a long, lone trail.

Dusk settled quickly. The policeman followed the trail as long as it was possible and then quickly made camp.

He fed the dogs sparingly that night. Tomorrow they would have hard work to do.

As soon as he himself had eaten he rolled up in his old rabbitskin sleeping robe, sheltered only by a hastily stretched tarpaulin. Two minutes later he was sound asleep.

BERKHEAD was up before dawn. By the time the first gray light came through the bush from the south and east, Berkhead had eaten, packed, and harnessed the dogs. As soon as the trail was visible, he pressed forward.

He had mushed less than an hour when he suddenly threw back his head, sniffing the keen air sharply.

Smoke! The keen tang of wood smoke, bespeaking the near presence of mankind. He went forward slowly, cautiously, coming up the wind. A moment later he saw the camp.

It was a very ordinary trapper's camp, squatting contentedly in the deep snow. A cheerful stream of smoke twisted away from the tin chimney. There were numerous trails leading to and from the cabin, but the fact that caught Berkhead's attention was that the trail he was following led directly to the door of the camp.

For an instant Berkhead hesitated. Mariette knew that he was coming. The trail had told the whole story to the experienced eye of the Mounty. Mariette had first come directly to this camp. He had established headquarters here, perhaps got in touch with his friends; for there were the trails of more than one pair of webs around the camp. And then backtrailed to his lookout. He had waited there until he saw Berkhead coming along the trail. Then he had hurried back to the camp. He was there, beyond the shadow of a doubt, watching, waiting. Probably peering out right now through the little square window beside the door, his gun ready. . . .

Berkhead shrugged briefly. There was no other way out of it. If it was an ambush, he'd have to take a chance.

He made sure that his gun was loose in its holster, and the holster in just the right place for quick action. Then, every nerve and muscle tense, he walked out from the shelter of the bush, headed straight for the waiting camp.

Closer and closer Berkhead came, and still there was neither sound nor movement from the camp.

Perhaps Mariette was waiting now for the policeman to get very close, so there would be less danger of a miss. That, Berkhead thought grimly, was a game two could play at. Provided, of course, the breed wasn't too quick and too good with his gun.

Berkhead paused, wondering, in front of the door and wrung out of his webs. His string of dogs squatted behind him, their muzzles hoary with frost, their eyes bright and curious. Was this the end of the trail?

Slowly the Mounty drew his gun. With the butt of it he rapped sharply on the door.

For a moment there was no answer, and then suddenly, from within, came the unexpected sound of laughter. It was not forced mirth, but honest laughter, as though at some supreme joke. And it was not the laughter of one man, but of several.

"Come een, come een," shouted a voice from within. "*Sacre bleu, m'sieu'*, stand not there in the cold! Come in and have the laugh weeth us!"

If it was a trap, it was a queer one, oddly baited. It was worth looking into; perhaps it would even prove exciting. Berkhead hoped so. It was a long time since anything exciting had happened.

His eyes bright with expectancy, his gun in its holster but ready for instant use, Berkhead stepped quickly inside, leaped nimbly to one side, and flung the door shut instantly behind him.

"M'SIEU' is a jumping jack, *non?*" inquired a mocking voice from the gloom.

Berkhead peered through the semidarkness, a sudden scowl between his brows. He did not like the tone of the speaker's voice. But he waited until he could see before he replied.

In a few seconds his eyes adjusted themselves and he could see the occupants of the room quite clearly. There were three of them; two sitting on the bunk, one sitting on a stool near the table, leaning his elbows on the table indolently.

The man at the table was looking up at the tall, almost gaunt policeman. Somehow, from his attitude, Berkhead guessed this man to be the one who had spoken. He looked at the man coldly, his mouth setting in ugly lines.

"Name of Berkhead," he said very quietly. "Corporal Berkhead, of the Royal Canadian Mounted."

"Oh! M'sieu' then ees *not* a jumping jack," said the man at the table interestedly. "I was wrong," he added, turning to the two men on the bunk. "M'sieu' ees *not* a jumping jack. He ees a Redcoat!"

The two men laughed as though at some excellent bit of humor.

Berkhead's frown deepened. What sort of a game was this? He decided to find out quickly.

"I want one Gaston Mariette," he said shortly. "Where is he?"

A burst of laughter greeted the remark; followed it so quickly that Berkhead knew they had been but waiting for him to make this announcement. Something like a glimmering of their game came to him.

"My name ees Smeeth," chuckled the man on the stool. "Smeeth. A very gud name, that, *hein?*"

"I am wan Jones," said one of the men on the bunk; the larger of the pair, and possessed of a very deep, gruff voice. "That ees also a vairy gud name, ees eet not so, m'sieu'?" The words, drawled lazily, mockingly, brought a dangerous fleck of color to Berkhead's weathered, leathery cheeks.

"And you," snapped Berkhead, taking a step forward, his eyes fixed on the third man. "I suppose your name is Brown?"

The third man shook his head. Like the others, he was a half breed, with round, piggish eyes set without expression in a a flat, round face. His nose was as flat and ugly as the noses of the others, but his lips were a trifle less sullen. He smiled up at Berkhead with childlike candor.

"*Non.* I am sorree, but m'sieu' mistake me for someone else," he said. "The name ees not the mane of M'sieu' Brown. My name ees—Green!"

The three men, who had been waiting with breathless anticipation for this denouement, burst into a roar of laughter, pounding their knees and each other in a very ecstasy of enjoyment.

"*Ventrebleu!*" gasped the man at the table. "Eet ees not Brown, but Green! *Sacre vache!*" Another spasm of laughter gripped him and he threw back his head, holding his sides, while Berkhead, his anger mounting every instant, stood there glaring at the three men who mocked him and the uniform he wore.

One of these three breeds was Gaston Mariette, Berkhead was sure of that. But which one? The sketchy description he had of the killer would fit one of these men as well as the other. To take all three of them back was impossible. They could not take along supplies enough to make the long journey.

Berkhead felt a sudden, savage desire to resort to torture. This was his first case as a corporal. Was he to fall down on it? Damn them, they would laugh, would they? He glared around, his huge fists knotting into hard balls of bone and sinew.

Then, suddenly, the ludicrousness of his position struck him. There he was, within a few feet of his man, and couldn't pick him out! No wonder they were laughing at him. It was a bitter joke, but in spite of himself, Berkhead chuckled.

"Clever, all right," he said frankly, seating himself. "Whoever thought it out had a head on him. Jones, Smith and Green—you three! Hell's fire! What names!"

And the four of them laughed together. Three of them laughed because they had fooled so successfully a man they feared. The fourth one laughed heartily because laughter is one of the best disguises for emotions, and something was passing in Berkhead's mind that he did not wish the others to glimpse.

"EET ees too bad," remarked the bass voiced breed who had suggested that he be addressed as Jones, "that thees—what ees hees name, Mariette?—ees not here. M'sieu' will be going on vairy soon, *oui?*"

All three of them looked at Berkhead expectantly. The words were a scarcely veiled threat. The policeman looked around doubtfully.

"Damned—if I know," he hesitated. "This thing's got me guessing. The Old Man'll raise hell if I go back empty handed."

"But, m'sieu'," said the pseudo Smith mockingly, "ees eet that we can help? One of us, we would not do, *non?*"

"One of you would do damned well," grinned Berkhead ruefully. "The trouble is, which one? I can't take all three of you, that's sure. None of us would ever get there alive."

"M'sieu' ees so thoughtful," murmured the deep voiced member of the trio.

"Oh, very!" echoed the smiling "Mr. Green."

Berkhead repressed a murderous impulse behind a gentle smile and a pair of bland eyes.

"Well, we wouldn't," he argued defensively. "There's no use butting your head against a stone wall."

"No. Not at all," nodded the man at the table, and Berkhead thought he detected a tinge of grimness in the gently mocking voice.

"And so," went on Berkhead calmly, "I'm going back."

He started drawing some paper from an inner pocket, but out of the tail of his eye he caught the triumphant flicker in three pairs of eyes. He smoothed out a piece of paper on the table, and with a stubby and grimy pencil wrote rapidly for a minute or two, while the trio looked on with interest.

"There," said Berkhead, passing the paper to the man at the table, "read that out loud, will you?"

The man accepted the paper, looked it over carefully, grinning. Then, in a rather oratorical voice, he stumbled through it:

"We, the undersigned, have not seen the Gaston Mariette wanted by the police, as represented by Corporal Berkhead."

"Now what?" asked the man, handing back the paper.

"Now all three of you sign it," smiled Berkhead. "Smith, and Jones, and Green. That'll show the Old Man I was here, and did what I could." Berkhead smiled inwardly at that; a vision of the old man, reading that paper, coming before his eyes.

"Smith" studied his companions doubtfully. Evidently Berkhead's idea was not particularly appealing.

"Otherwise," put in Berkhead shrewdly, "I'll have to keep hunting around a while. I couldn't go back empty handed, you know."

"I weel sign eet," growled "Smith," coming to a sudden decision.

"Your so charming company we weel hate to loose, m'sieu', but—" He shrugged ridiculously.

"I also weel sign," said the deep voiced breed, getting up from his bunk. "Geeve me the penceel."

"Just a moment!" said Berkhead hastily. "You must first read it aloud, before you sign. It is the law."

The deep voiced one looked up truculently, his dull little eyes round and vicious.

"I don't read," he said shortly.

"That's all right, just repeat it after me," said Berkhead, and grumblingly, the man did as suggested. When he had attached his mark to the already grimy paper, the third man was writing.

"You can read, or shall I read it for you?" asked Berkhead.

"I can read." He picked up the paper, studied it carefully for a moment, and then read it quickly aloud. Below the barely legible "M. Smith" and the emphatic "X" he carefully printed, in sprawling capitals, "G. G. Green."

"Eet ees too bad that m'sieu' ees leaving so soon," remarked "Smith" in a tone of subtle insult.

Berkhead looked up calmly.

"I have business outside," he said quietly, and the good-natured indecision was gone from his voice now. He picked up the paper, glanced at it, folded it carefully, and tucked it away in an inner pocket. "I'll keep this for a souvenir," he smiled—rather a bleak smile.

"M'sieu' means—" purred "Green" looking up with sudden suspicion.

Berkhead whirled suddenly. His gun was in his hand, his finger tight and tense on the trigger.

"Put 'em up!" he snapped. "Way up—quick!"

Almost automatically the startled men obeyed.

"Good!" said Berkhead quietly. "Now keep them there—unless you want to find out whether they teach us to shoot or not."

"But—" boomed the bass voice of the very angry "Mr. Jones."

"Shut up!" Berkhead bit the words off viciously. "You've had your fun, you three. I've heard all I want to hear from you."

His glance wandered from one amazed and frightened face to another; came grimly to rest on the turgid, greasy face of "Mr. Green."

"Get into your trail clothes, you," said Berkhead grimly. "You're coming with me—*Mariette!*"

The man's face drained a dirty white.

"You say——"

Berkhead interrupted him, rattling off the familiar formula of arrest.

"Is that clear?" he added grimly.

While Mariette got ready, Berkhead disarmed the three of them, taking every weapon in view. Then, his snarling prisoner in front of him, Berkhead backed towards the door. As he opened it, he paused for a moment and addressed the two men who were standing, hands elevated helplessly, in the middle of the room.

"You've done enough, you two," he said sharply. "I'd advise you to stay out of this affair from now on—strictly out of it. It won't pay to monkey. I've got Mariette, and I'm going to take him out. Any more trouble from you two, and Mariette here will have company. That clear?"

The erstwhile "Mr. Smith" nodded.

"Oui, m'sieu!" he said respectfully. Somehow the tables had been turned. This was no time for insolence, and the breed sensed the fact.

"Et ees vairy clear," said the bass voiced one with an equally vigorous nod.

"Good!" said Berkhead cheerily, and keeping his prisoner carefully covered, he hurried him outside to where the dogs were waiting.

"It's the back trail for us, pups," he said contentedly.

"BUT how," growled the Old Man, his close-cropped white mustache bristling like the hair of an angry bull moose, "did this fool paper help you find out which was Mariette? You had no signatures or fingerprints, as I get it."

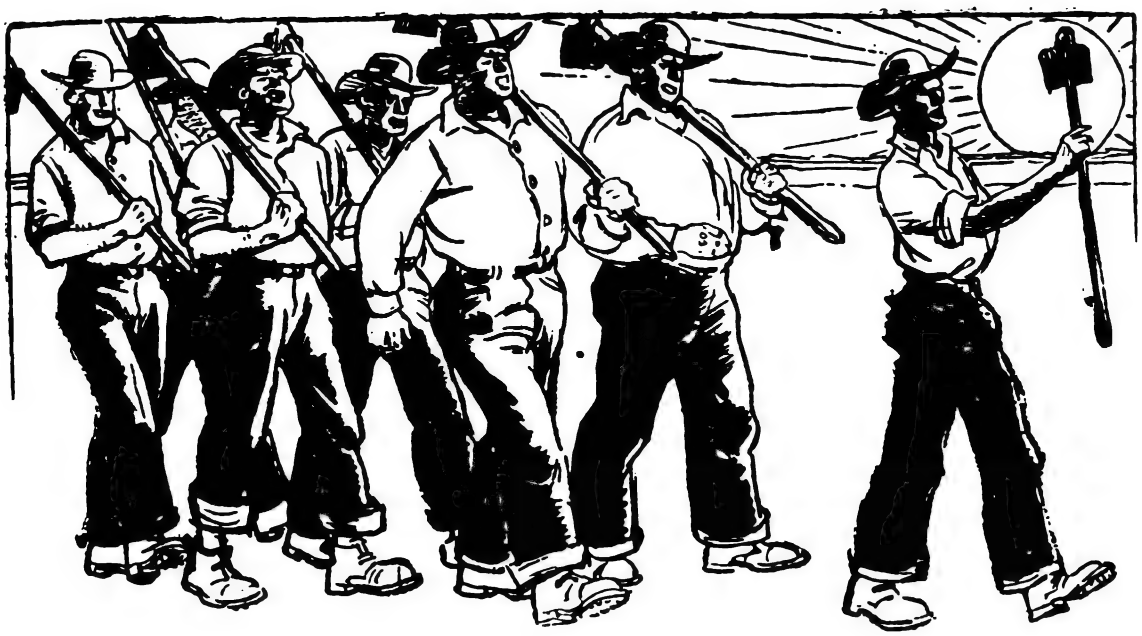
"The paper was only a stratagem. I wanted to get all three of them to pronounce the name of Gaston Mariette. You know, sir, a man can never pronounce his own name in full without a certain amount of awkwardness. There's a little hesitation, or a tendency to blur the syllables. It's hard to describe, but notice for yourself sometime.

"The first two ran over the name casually. It was rather an anxious moment when the third chap started reading. But he betrayed himself when he came to his own name. So I had him."

"By gad, Corporal, that's good!" chuckled the Old Man. "Out of his own mouth, by godfrey! Ha!" He looked around carefully, to make sure the orderly was not in the room. Discipline must be maintained.

The Old Man shoved a box of cigars across the desk.

"Have a smoke, Corporal," he grunted. "You *rate* those chevrons!"



A CONVICT RHAPSODY

A Brief Narrative of the Prison Camps

By BOB POUNDS

WE SANG carelessly, almost exultantly, as we walked slowly down the long dusty road that led to the camp in the far distance. Old Hannah had scorched the heavens for hours and was just dipping beneath the heat-swirling horizon. Along the high ditchbanks and upon the grassy headlands, innumerable crickets chirped and queer little frogs gazed unblinkingly upon the majesty that was the end of the day. Swaying on the parallel telephone wires, like leaves in a gentle autumn breeze, two mocking birds took swift flight as if in resentment at the noisy acclaim of our singing. There was a peculiar lilt to the song, almost spiritual, and a mournful cadence furnished metered incentive to tired and lagging feet that had walked many weary miles since sunup.

"'Well, Judge, oh Judge, oh kindhearted Judge,
What're you gonna do with me?'
Says, 'If that jury finds you guilty, po' boy,
I'm gonna send you to the penitentiary.'

"Well, that jury found me guilty, po' boy,
And the clerk, he wrote it down.
That judge, he passed the sentence on me,
And I'm the cool penitentiary bound.

"Well, the man, he come and got me, po' boy,
Throw'd a chain around my neck.
Says, 'Get up all your belongings,
You're going with me direct.'

"Well, the warden ask me my name, po' boy,
And I told him Archibald Dome,
'You lie,' says he. 'It's Four-Forty-Four.
You left your name at home.'

"I picks the man his cotton, po' boy,
I hoes him all his corn,
I calls him cool, kind, heavenly MAN.
And I wish I'd never been born.

"Well, Rosie sees the governing man,
She pleads down on her knees;
She axes him like an angel would,
To please, sir, set me free.

"'How come, how come,' he hollers at her,
'That I should set him free,
When the jury give him natural life,
In the cool penitentiary?'

"So let this be a lesson, po' boy,
And don't do nothing wrong,
And you'll never be in prison,
And you'll never sing this song."

About five paces in front of the squad, walked Mike, The Information Kid, swinging his clumsy hoe in easy imitation, and with all the flamboyant, jaunty ostentation, of a baton major, keeping perfect time with the rhythm of the song. Mike is the intelligentsia of our squad. He can do anything and is a veritable walking encyclopedia of technical knowledge. His finely chiseled features and high, wide forehead, easily reflecting a strong intellect and evident good breeding. He is in on a short con racket.

Leading the singing with a coarse but naturally harmonious baritone, Dirty might easily have been distinguished for his enormous size. The Captain calls Dirty his Bull amongst the Bullies. He derived his unbecoming nickname from the fact that he perspires profusely when working and the dust clings to his damp skin like flies to a sugar barrel, causing him to always appear dirty and unclean. His prison record declares him to be 'dangerous and vicious,' but in reality the big boy is kind and considerate to everyone, oftentimes jumping on some "fresh fish's" row to aid him in keeping up with the squad and escaping the abusive invective of the riding boss. Dirty's doing his fifth stretch. Got life this time for h'isting a bank.

Strabo's voice is like his eyes, crossed and unimaginative. Almost as large as Dirty, Strabo is divinely ignorant and unlettered, leaning heavily upon the sophistication of Mike and the others in a needful moment. He is exceeding friendly and loyal, kneeling in nightly prayer amid the amused smiles of his more agnostic comrades. In his idle hours he plays Sancho Panza to the voluble Mike, who patiently attends his childish queries and inane interrogations with admirable forbearance. Strabo's doing it all for bumping off his wife. He caught her living in adultery and turned a shotgun loose on her.

The only one in the squad who does not sing when we come dragging back to camp in the exhilarating cool of the evening, after a toiling day in the field, is Happy. He couldn't coax a tune out of a dago's organ grinding monkey machine. He's imbecilic, with the mind of a five year old. But he is big and husky and a good hoe hand, so the Captain keeps him in our Number One Squad. Happy's head is shaped precisely like a huge firebrick, square and incongruously abutting. A slender, effeminate neck lends it frail support and makes him appear almost grotesque. Happy is very sensitive, and quite easily offended and insulted if any remark should be made concerning the abnormality of his head. Throughout the long gruelling days of monotonous hoeing, Happy wears a silly, vacuous grin. Hence his nickname. Sometimes, when obsessed with the futility of further struggle with the barren and sterile years, I cannot help but envy him his blissful ignorance. Happy is doing a straight ninety-nine for chopping off some mutt's head who persisted in referring to Happy as "Old Brickhead."

OLD HOLY JOE presents the most worth while contrast of us all. A great mop of curly, iron gray hair lends dignity to the weak, undetermined lines of his sensuous face. One could scarcely discern the wilful degeneracy in the old reprobate unless intimately associated with him. He carries a small Testament with him all the time and injects beatitudes and Scriptural injunctions into all of his conversation. His voice, like a mellow flute, is as false as his heart, and his eyes slightly protrude like those of a fish. Long ago he tried to sing religious and spiritual hymns on these long walks back to camp when our day was done, but we soon convinced him that the proper time and place to sing them was with his little converted flock of perpetual backsliders that congregated every Sunday afternoon to receive spiritual sustenance from his hypocritical hands. Today the old Judas knows and sings all our blues from "Let Old Dirty Have the Lead" to "He May Read My Mail, But He Sure Can't Read My Mind." Holy Joe is doing his third prison sentence, all for the same type of charge. I suppose the judge got tired of fooling with him this last time, for he gave him the book. His charge is a social crime rarely discussed in the family circle.

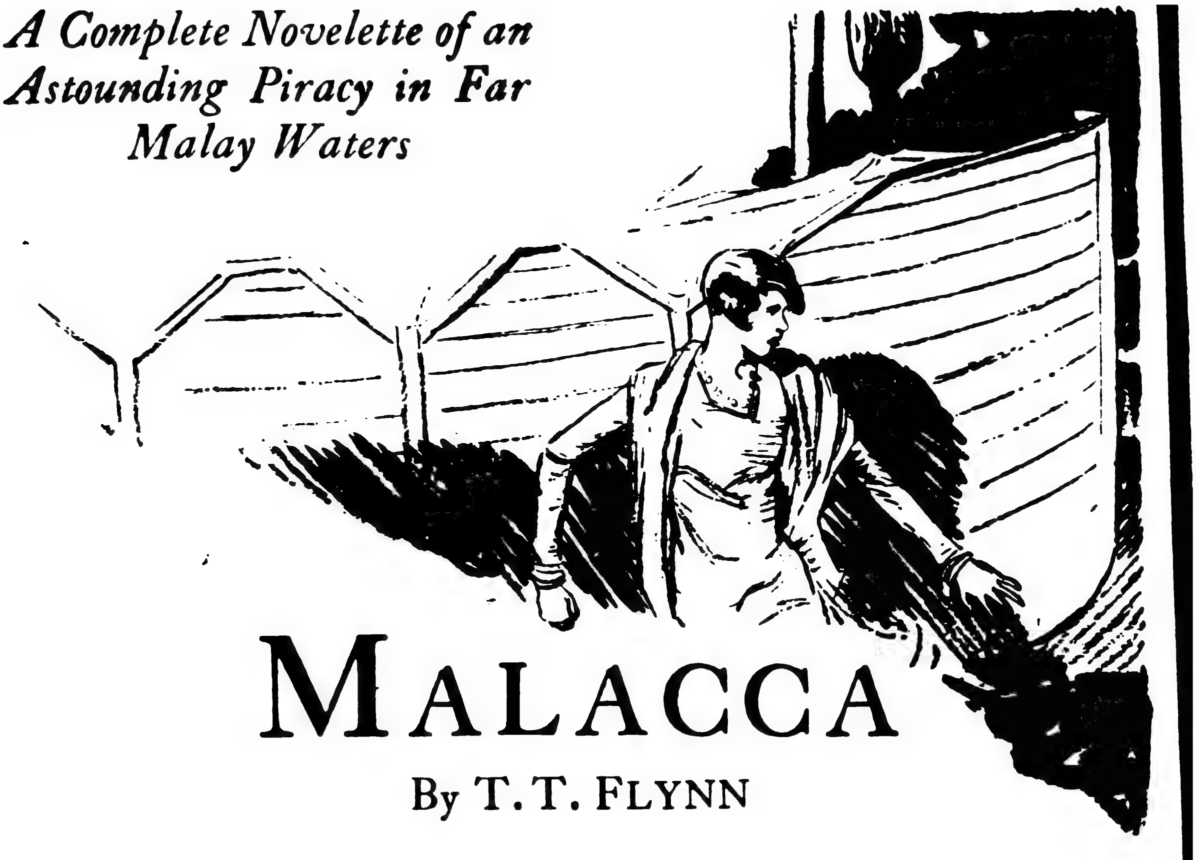
Heart Trouble is an old dopehead. He has been fighting "junk" for more than thirty years, and his body is covered from head to feet with a million little blue-purplish needle marks. He alternately sings and grumbles, being always on the alert to agitate a mutiny or rib up a fight. He's an eight time loser and still going strong. Once in a while he throws a fit but the prison doctor calls him a malingerer and keeps him out in the fields. The Captain hates him for his bold arrogance and truculent insubordination, but Heart Trouble don't care for that; as he says, "I've been at the game too long to let a two-by-four man-breaker like him break me." But we take it for granted that he'd double on his own mother for a "Joy Pop," so he's like old Holy Joe, with us but not one of us. He's doing eight summers for night burglary in a drug store.

Old Daddy Smith is a case for the angels. Kindly, unprepossessing, and always more than willing to perform his share, yet free from the groveling whine of the sycophant. Life's greatest tragedy has bowed his shoulders and filled his heart with the misanthropy of an ascetic. About two years ago, Old Daddy Smith struck oil on his half section. Overnight, poverty and privation changed to wealth and plenty. He had queer but Godly ideas as to how he should spend his money—and his wife and daughter, suddenly endowed with the cunning of Lucretia Borgia and the faithlessness of Cleopatra, framed him on the vilest of charges. He got twenty years.

Twenty or thirty paces behind us, Uncle Johnny, the Boss-Man, hollered: "Hold 'em down up there, Old Mike, or we'll get in afore sundown." Sitting on Old Sarah, who's mighty anxious to get to the mule lot and that juicy sorghum trough, Uncle Johnny looks hardboiled and adamant, but each day he proves his consanguinity to us by his kindly treatment and thoughtful consideration of his bullies.

Me? Why I'm Old Bighead. Mike and I fell together outa Houston!

A Complete Novelette of an Astounding Piracy in Far Malay Waters



MALACCA

By T. T. FLYNN

SOMERSET heard the angry cries of his orang-outang when he turned the corner of the Port Kali dock shed. A full grown, furious orang is a thing to be afraid of. Somerset broke into a run.

The cage was just inside the first entrance. A woman's voice reached his ears as he came to that point.

"You brute! Let the poor thing alone!"

Somerset took in the scene with a sweeping glance. The stout rattan bound cage which held the huge orang-outang. A half dozen or so Chinese coolies standing before it. A white woman facing the coolie nearest the cage, her eyes flashing with indignation.

The coolie was much larger than she, larger than any of his fellows, pockmarked, brutal faced. He held a stick, with which he had evidently been teasing the caged animal. Now he stood and glowered at the young woman who had interrupted his sport. She faced him, unafraid.

The big coolie spat something in his native tongue, and then turned to the cage and jabbed the stick through the bars. A man laughed.

The caged animal leaped at the tormenting stick and, when it was swiftly withdrawn, beat his great hairy chest in savage anger and threw himself against the cage bars, trying to tear them apart, screaming his rage.

Somerset charged through the watching group, laid hold of the big coolie's arm and jerked him around, so that he lost his balance and staggered.

"Get out!" Somerset ordered furiously. He placed his palm against the fellow's chest and pushed violently. The coolie reeled back among the others. Then, catlike, recovered his balance and stepped forward, his face dark with anger. No humble Chinese this. His fingers curved, tautened, and his lips drew back over stained teeth.

Somerset took a step nearer the man.

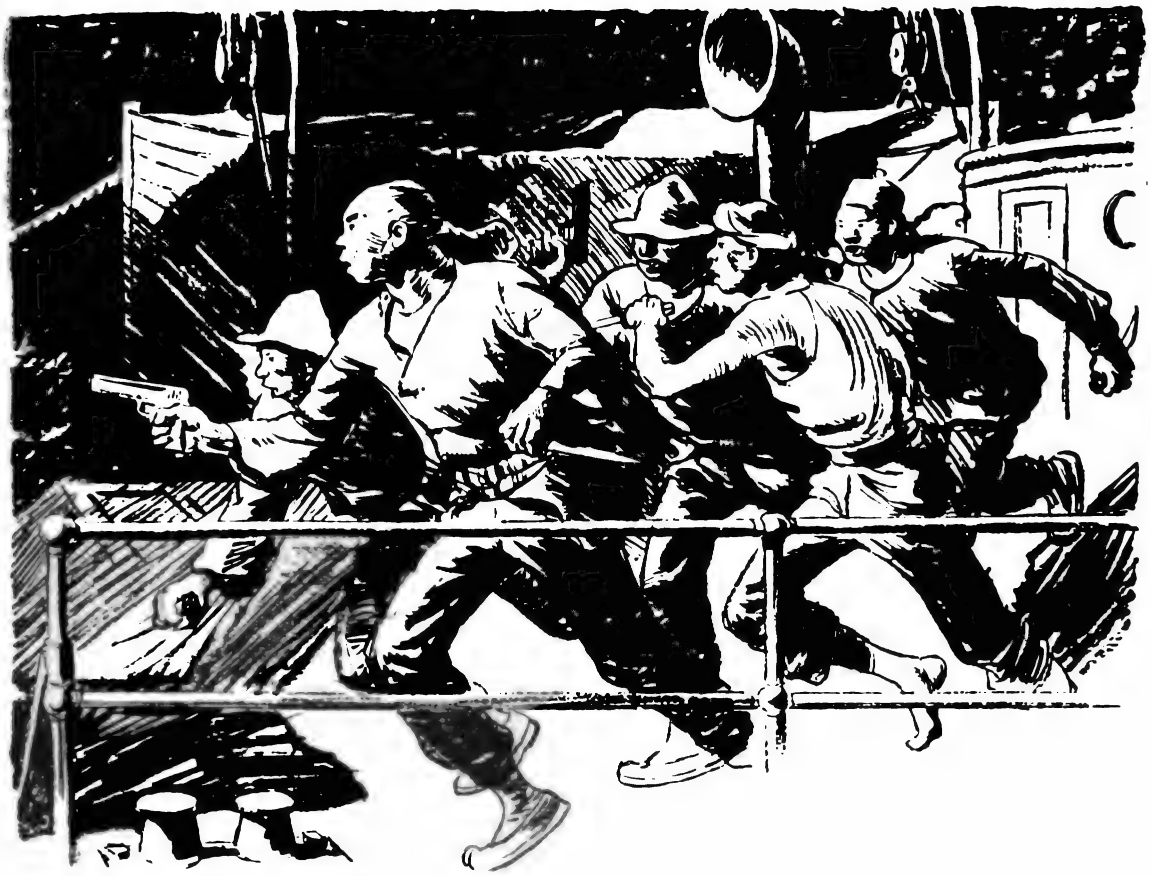
"Get out!" he said through his teeth again and gestured with his arm.

For a long moment they faced each other.

One of the other coolies suddenly spoke in shrill Chinese. It took effect. The big fellow turned abruptly, shouldered through the men and stalked out into the white glare of the Sumatran sunlight. They followed him.

Somerset turned to the young woman.

"Thank you," he said, removing his



helmet. "I heard you order him away. Mighty decent of you."

She was of medium height, slender, with sun tinted skin. Not a Dutch type, as were most of the wives and daughters of the Dutch business men of Port Kali and the planters of the district. Yankee, Somerset decided on the spot.

With Yankee breeziness she shrugged his thanks away.

"It was nothing. I can't stand to see a caged animal tormented—even if it is as fearsome as this one."

They both looked at the cage. The beast within had quieted, and was crouching in one corner of the cramped space, glaring at them silently. He was, as she had said a fearsome thing to contemplate. There was strength in his shoulders and powerful arms that could shred a man to bits as one might shred paper. The torso was in proportion. And the black, savage face that surveyed them was startlingly human.

"I was a little frightened," she confessed. "Suppose he had broken out?"

"That coolie wouldn't have poked any more sticks into a cage," Somerset told her grimly. "He was a fool! An orangoutang has tremendous strength. They often kill natives in the jungle."

"Isn't it dangerous to ship him?"

"Not very, unless the cage has a weak point, and someone angers him, as that fellow was doing. This cage is stout. Good thing, too, since the dock guard doesn't seen to be very attentive."

They talked a few minutes more. Somerset learned that her name was Miss Baird, that she was touring alone, had just crossed Sumatra from the West coast, and was going to Singapore, also. She left right after that.

Somerset put fresh water in the cage and then set out to see what he could do about getting out of port before the next *Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij* boat left, two days later.

He was in luck. A small Dutch steamer, the *Celebes Queen*, was due in that afternoon to discharge a bit of freight. She was not a passenger boat, but could accommodate several passengers on occasion. Somerset engaged passage for himself and the orang, and then went around to see Sam Wat Li, the elderly, saffron faced owner of the Wat Li Trading Company, about forwarding some animals to Singapore.

That was Somerset's business. Wild animals.

SOMERSET AND JONES, ORCHARD ROAD,
SINGAPORE. ANIMALS AND BIRDS.
ANYTHING—ANYWHERE

You gave your order, tiger, elephant, python, mouse deer, anything from any part of the world. They got it for you. Sometimes they picked it up from other dealers. Many times they went out into the jungle, the forest, or grassland, and got it themselves. The point is, they delivered. You could bank on it. They had that reputation on the Continent, England, all over the States. More orders came in than they could handle.

Sam Wat Li occasionally forwarded animals to them. The Wat Li Trading Company did not go in for that sort of business, but there was an old debt between Somerset and Sam Wat Li, a matter of Li's nephew, whose life Somerset had saved. Li was glad to pay on it at every opportunity. Now, in the dim recesses of the Wat Li Trading Company's place of business, he greeted Somerset cordially.

"I am made happy by sight of you, my friend. My roof is yours, and all beneath it."

And, when they were seated and Somerset had lighted one of the excellent Surabaya cheroots that were only tendered to the most honored visitors under that roof, Sam Wat Li settled his heavy form in his chair and said impassively:

"You brought back a fine animal."

Somerset had said nothing about the orang, and Sam Wat Li had not seen it. Nevertheless, Somerset was not surprised. Sam Wat Li knew everything. Matters were handled by the Wat Li Trading Company that were not spoken of, and many things were known to Sam Wat Li that were hidden to the rest of the world. Somerset nodded and agreed.

"One of the best I ever saw. Had a time getting him. He almost broke through the nets. Thought I was going to have to shoot him to save one of the Malays, but we finally got him in the cage. I'm taking him to Singapore on the *Celebes Queen*. She's stopping in from Penang in a few hours."

"The *Celebes Queen?*" Sam Wat Li asked thoughtfully and closed his eyes slowly. He sat there a moment, like a fat, serene Buddha whose head contained no thought of any kind.

Somerset knew differently. Sam Wat Li's brain was second to none; and it was always working. He waited, puffing contentedly at the cheroot and letting the thin smoke trickle appreciatively through his nostrils.

Sam Wat Li's eyes opened after a moment.

"Must you go to Singapore so soon, my friend?"

"Yes."

"Stay over until the next boat. I will have a feast prepared this evening, such as you never had placed before you. You have faced danger and worked hard. Now it is fitting that you rest."

"Sorry," Somerset answered regretfully. "A letter from my partner was waiting for me at the hotel. Been there three days. He wants me back in Singapore as soon as possible. Important business. When Jones says it's important, it is. I'll have to take the *Celebes Queen* this afternoon."

Sam Wat Li closed his eyes again. Somerset watched him curiously. Why did this wily old Celestial want him to stay in Port Kali? Friendship there was beween them, it was true. The door of Sam Wat Li's house was always open to him. His presence might even bring joy into the heart of the portly old merchant. But, that the attachment was so deep that he be urged to delay his departure, was not probable. It had not been that way before. There was no reason for it being that way now. There must be a reason. Sam Wat Li was not a man who said or did anything without reason.

Slowly the eyes in the saffron face opened.

"Our friendship has been as beautiful as a full blown lotus flower," Sam Wat Li said slowly and nodded thoughtfully.

"As comforting as the treasures in the four books," Somerset agreed.

"There is a debt between us that cannot be repaid."

Somerset waved the cheroot deprecatingly.

"It is so, my friend. Because of that friendship, and that debt, listen to my words."

Somerset nodded silently.

"Do not go on the *Celebes Queen* this afternoon."

Somerset studied the saffron face. Not an emotion there. Nothing to betray the reason for the statement. But there must be a reason! A good one, to cause the old merchant to betray the fact that he knew anything.

"Your words are as jewels," Somerset told him carefully. "But there is reason for haste, my friend. Is there more you can say?"

"I have said too much. Honor me by heeding."

Somerset came to a sudden decision.

"It shall be as you say," he agreed. "I shall wait for the mail boat."

"And what has been said will be forgotten?"

"It has never been spoken."

"You have made me happy." Sam Wat Li smiled like a benign old idol.

SOMERSET had left orders with the agent to have the rattan bound cage containing the giant orang loaded on the *Celebes Queen* as soon as she was able to take cargo. He went now to that office a second time to say that he had changed his mind. As he came up to the building, the front door opened and Miss Baird came out.

She smiled as they met.

Somerset smiled back and raised his helmet. He was about to pass her, intent on his own business, when a sudden thought struck him. He stopped abruptly and asked:

"You weren't, by any chance, thinking of taking the *Celebes Queen* to Singapore, were you?"

She stopped also, and smiled again, and said:

"Why, yes. How did you guess?"

"This man is agent for her. It seemed obvious."

"The hotel manager said that I might be able to get passage on her. I came right over and was lucky. One vacant stateroom is left. It will save two days."

Somerset nodded and his thoughts worked rapidly. There was reason why he should not go on the *Celebes Queen*. If it applied to him, he was unwilling to see this fresh young girl from the States go. What would not be good for him, with years of experience to his credit, would not be the thing for her. He said bluntly:

"Please take my advice. Wait over until the next boat."

Astonishment swept her face. She said quickly, coolly:

"I don't understand."

Somerset saw that he had been misunderstood, and the thought irritated him.

"I don't expect you to!" he told her stiffly. "But, as one traveler to another, a white man to a white woman, if you will, don't go on the *Celebes Queen* this afternoon."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I can tell you nothing. I am breaking a solemn promise in saying anything. I have been warned not to go on her by one who always knows of what he speaks. His advice is good enough for me. I am passing it on to you."

"You are not taking the boat because some man advised you not to? And didn't tell you why?"

"Exactly that."

"How perfectly silly!"

It angered Somerset to have this chit of a young woman dismiss so lightly the carefully given advice of Sam Wat Li, who had been wise in the ways of good and evil when she was a babe in her cradle.

"Don't be a fool!" he said sharply. "I am telling you this in strictest confidence, for your own good. I have no personal interest in it. Nor do I habitually indulge in pipe dreams, or follow foolish advice. Ask your hotel manager if you think that. Go to the banker. He will tell you that my advice can be followed. I ask you, however, not to say what the advice is. A promise is a promise. I can't have it go any farther."

She had been looking at him searchingly. Somerset saw that she believed he was sincere, but was not convinced.

"Why?" she asked stubbornly. "What reason could there be for not taking the boat? I am sure I will be well treated by the officers. I will be satisfied with the quarters, even if they are poor. The trip is a short one. It can't be much more than twenty-four hours, even with a small, slow boat."

"I can't tell you why! Advice isn't always accompanied by a reason, even when it is of the best. This came from a man who never speaks without having the facts to bank on. It is enough for me. It should be enough for you."

She shook her head, said coolly:

"Sorry. It isn't. You'll have to give me more reason than that. I've gotten along well so far, and have no doubt I will this time."

"Do it then!" Somerset snapped. He turned, stalked away, forgetting his errand with the agent, forgetting everything, save his sudden anger against this clear eyed young woman who called his solicitude for her welfare silly, and who calmly went ahead against his solemn warning. She deserved whatever she got, he told himself angrily. And the next moment he knew that the *Celebes Queen* would take them both from Port Kali. If she would be a fool, he would be a bigger fool and go also.

THE *Celebes Queen* was kin to a hundred other ships of that motley fleet of small steamers that poke weather-beaten bows into the tide rivers, the mangrove swamps, the unnameable little ports and landings that are scattered haphazardly from Calcutta to Torres Strait. The Dutch flag flew from her dumpy stern, and a portly Hollander captained her. Java boys for the cabin, Lascars below and on deck, Dutch officers and engineers.

Somerset stowed his bags in the stuffy cabin that was assigned to him and hunted up the captain to see about the disposition of the rattan bound cage.

Van Vlick was the captain's name. He was a pink cheeked Hollander with plump, stolid features and a vast middle section that bespoke his love of good food. Van Vlick scratched his chin slowly with the forefinger of his right hand and blinked his eyelids as he mulled over the matter.

"*Ja,*" he decided, after a moment or so of serious contemplation. "An orang, eh? There will be no room below deck. Above, he will have to go. On the after deck, with the coolies we are taking to Singapore. He will be all right there, mynheer. *Ja.*"

"Guess he will," Somerset agreed. "For a day, anyway. If there's weather and we ship water, he can be moved."

"*Ja,*" the captain agreed placidly.

So, with much swearing in Dutch and English by the harried first mate, slings were fixed around the cage and it was swung on board to the noisy clatter of a rickety deck winch. Aft of the after hatch it was placed, and the coolie deck passengers crowded close to look. Laborers they were for the most part, whose terms of service on the tobacco plantations were up: Malays, Javanese and Chinese. They were going back to the villages and towns from which they had been brought, with money in their possession and freedom in their hearts. Men and women stared at the great orang-outang and discussed him in a babel of tongues and tones.

The *Celebes Queen* presently cast off and throbbed slowly down the muddy tropical river which connects Port Kali with the pale waters of the Strait of the Malacca.

Somerset, walking thoughtfully up and down on the boat deck, met Miss Baird. She spoke good-naturedly when he was yet some feet away.

"How is this? I thought this boat was taboo."

"It was—until you insisted on going." Somerset removed his helmet and stopped.

She laughed and joined him.

"You hold me responsible for your presence here?" she asked.

"If you will have it. Yes."

"What a silly attitude. I didn't ask you to take the old boat. I merely stated I was going myself."

Silly attitude! Once again Somerset was swept with sharp irritation that mounted almost to anger. He had indeed been a fool to give way to the impulse that had seized him. Silly attitude? Damn silly! He should have let her stew in whatever came along. So he thought, and scowled at the black, snakelike mangrove roots that crept out of the muddy river water and merged into the tangle of growth on the banks. She marked the scowl, but did not lose her good humor.

"You told me that you had been advised not to take this boat. Was anything said about other people? How do you know that the warning applied to anyone else?"

How, indeed? Somerset started to say something, and then stopped. She had him there. Sam Wat Li had not hinted of other people. Somerset had taken it for granted that whatever meant danger for him, meant danger for her. That idea might be wrong. Perhaps he had made a fool out of himself. The thought irritated him more than ever. He, an old-timer in that part of the world, as years of residence were measured, had really done a silly thing.

"I don't know," he admitted sulkily. "You may be right. This trip may be as safe as a stroll down Cavanagh Road in Singapore. It looks quiet enough now. But I didn't fancy letting you take a chance. None of my business, of course."

"Of course it was, if you really thought that way. I am glad enough that you thought to advise me; even if I didn't listen, and caused you to change your plans. Will you shake and be friends the rest of the trip?"

She held out her hand. Somerset took it, feeling a trifle sheepish about the irritation that had just taken possession of him. It was gone now, as suddenly as it had come. She was a likeable young woman, when she wasn't being stubborn.

THE *Celebes Queen* passed several high sterned Borneo *praus* beating upstream, painted eyes peering out from their sharp pointed bows. And then came to the sea. The low, swampy coast fell behind, and they pushed out into the hazy reaches of water and sky. Behind them the sun dipped toward the horizon.

The passengers were only four: Somerset, Miss Baird, and two missionaries, man and wife, bound down the coast to a tiny spot that no one ever heard of in everyday speech. No possible danger from them. Somerset met them, was polite, and dismissed them from his mind. At dinner, when the officers and passengers gathered together, he scrutinized the lot carefully, in search of one who might be the cause of Sam Wat Li's warning.

Van Vlick, placid, of few words, intent on his food, could be eliminated without hesitation. So could Cook, the broad shouldered first mate. That about ended the possibilities. No one else could be in a position to make trouble.

There was yet light after the meal. Somerset went to the boat deck for a smoke, more puzzled than ever. What could this danger be that Sam Wat Li had hinted of so strongly? Or was it danger? It must be! Nothing else would make any reason for delaying the trip. Somerset was pondering thus, leaning against the starboard rail, when a snarling cry of anger wafted up from the lower deck. It was the orang-outang, disturbed again. Somerset walked quickly to the after rail and looked down.

Scattered over the lower deck were the coolie deck passengers, smoking, eating, drinking, talking. About the cage, a little group was watching with interest. Next to the cage, standing out from the shorter Javanese, the slim Malays, was a larger figure. Somerset bunched his fist as he recognized the Chinese coolie who had been tormenting the orang on the Port Kali dock. The man had no stick now. He was pretending to thrust his arm into the cage; and the beast within was leaping at it in anger, trying to seize it.

Risky sport, in which the big coolie stood grave chances of losing his arm or his life. But courage he did not lack. Close to the cage he stood and tempted the big brute within again and again.

The orang beat his hairy chest in fury and bounded about the cramped quarters in which he was confined. And now and then he seized the bars of the cage and strove to tear them apart. They were stout young tree trunks, bound securely with tough rattan, and held firmly. Now and then the orang thrust a long, powerful arm through the bars and tried to reach the coolie. Even from the boat deck Somerset could see the anger, hate, eager desire on the face of the animal. Its eyes were fixed on the big coolie, lips curled back over great fangs, powerful, manlike fingers clutched at the empty air as the beast strained to reach out farther.

The coolie stood just out of reach, and once slapped the tips of the extended fingers with a swift movement. And then laughed as the great brute roared its fury. Somerset could see the laugh as the coolie turned his pockmarked face to take in the admiration on the faces of the watchers.

Somerset stood there by the rail and watched silently.

There was a chance that the orang would clutch his tormentor with a lucky grab. If he could do so, Somerset was willing, so great was his anger. This coolie had been warned away once. Now, persisting, he merited whatever fell to his lot.

The thing went on a few moments more. The man feinting, putting himself within reach and withdrawing quickly; the caged orang trying to reach him, screaming his anger now and then.

Suddenly Somerset became aware of a slim, skirted figure running across the after deck and pushing through the watchers around the cage. The Yankee girl, Miss Baird! The natives gave way before her. The coolie, warned by one of them, turned to face her.

Somerset waited no more. The Chinaman would not dare make a move against her; nevertheless, his place was down there at her side. He tossed the half smoked cheroot away, ran to the after companion, took the steps two at a time, and ran back toward the cage.

Miss Baird was facing the coolie, eyes flashing, fists clenched at her side.

"You brute! You insufferable beast! You should be in there in his place. You coward! You wouldn't dare come near him if he was free."

The coolie had not given ground. He stood before her, straight, scowling. Somerset recognized in the pockmarked face a certain brute courage, a spirit different from the usual obsequiousness of the ordinary run of his class. Here was a man who would be dangerous, if met beyond restraint of the white man's rule and prestige.

Somerset did not seize the coolie this time. He came up beside Miss Baird and stood there silently. She broke off when she saw him.

"He was tormenting the poor thing," she said passionately. "He ought to be whipped! Can't you do something to make him stop?"

Somerset nodded and looked at the coolie.

The man faced him, lips locked in a tight line, clearly determined not to run away. Back of him were the same half dozen or so men who had clustered in the same position on the Port Kali dock.

"Catchee English?" Somerset asked coldly.

"Can do," the other whipped back at him. He folded his arms across the loose cotton blouse that he wore and held his head high. There was little, if any, accent to his words. A mission boy probably, or one who had worked around white people a great deal.

"Listen, then! Bother this animal once more and I will complain to the captain and have you ironed. Is there orang blood in your veins, that you must play with one all the time?"

A man back in the group of watchers laughed. The face of the coolie darkened. His eyes flashed at Somerset, then swerved out toward the one who had laughed. The laugh was not repeated.

Somerset said no more. He knew it would be enough. The coolie had lost face with the gallery. He might better have struck the man with a club. That would not have aroused half the hate that loss of face did. But Somerset knew the orang would not be bothered again.

"It's all right now," he said to Miss Baird. "Let's leave."

She nodded and followed him. Somerset led the way back up to the boat deck. As they came out of the companion he looked down on the lower deck. Most of the watchers had drifted away, but the big coolie still stood by the cage. His face was turned toward the boat deck and, even at that distance, the scowl on his features was visible. In the cage back of him a great hairy form crouched and a savage face glared through the bars.

"Heaven help that fellow if he ever comes within the orang's reach," Somerset remarked soberly. "One clutch on any part of his anatomy, and it will all be over. The orang will pull him close to the bars and tear him to bits. Their strength is beyond belief."

She turned, saw the coolie, the crouching beast in the cage behind, and shuddered slightly.

"It makes me creepy to think about it."

"Don't," Somerset said. "Let's stroll up and down and think about other things. There is much beside coolies and orang-outangs."

"Indeed?" She laughed clearly and fell into step beside him. "What for instance?"

"Well—ourselves, our homes. Ever been to England?"

"Yes. Many times. I have an aunt who lives in London."

"I have an uncle. The rest of my people live in York. Ever been there?"

"I should say. I'll never forget the Five Sisters window in the north transept of the cathedral. The glass in it is some of the loveliest I have ever seen. I've always had a soft spot for old glass."

"I know the window," Somerset agreed. "Well might you like it. That window has some of the finest glass in all England. I don't know just how old it is, but the cathedral dates from the Thirteenth Century."

They spoke of York further. Like all men far from home, Somerset had a soft spot for the scenes of his childhood and he eagerly seized the chance to reminisce with one who had been there. So the minutes passed. Night fell quickly. Overhead, the great vault of the heavens stood out, studded with myriad stars, beautiful.

Unconsciously their voices lowered and they drew a trifle closer together as they walked. The ship pushed ahead steadily. There was a slight breeze from astern, and the smoke from the stack arose almost vertically, a steady plume that lost itself in the vastness of the star filled sky.

ON THE after deck the coolie passengers gathered in little groups; and here was low murmuring of voices, and now and then a carefree laugh. From some part of that deck a plaintive tune throbbed out from a one string instrument.

The cage which held the orang stood alone, unnoticed. Somerset made certain of that in the times they came to the back of the boat deck. His handling of the coolie had been sufficient. There would be no more trouble from that source.

The missionary and his wife joined them for a few minutes. But the four had little in common, and after a desultory exchange of words the missionaries drew apart. Presently they went below to their cabin.

"Have you located the great danger you were warned against?" Miss Baird asked, when they were alone again.

Somerset sensed an undercurrent of lightness in her voice. This time, however, he was not irritated. After knowing her it was impossible to be that.

"You're spoofing me," he charged.

"Go to the head of the class," she laughed. "But, seriously, have you? I'm not as scatter-brained as you think. I did realize there was something to it all. There must have been to occasion a warning. I'm curious. Really."

"So am I," Somerset confessed. "But I can't find a thing that would cause any suspicion. You can see for yourself. Two missionaries who wouldn't harm a *ghekko* lizard. The captain is all right. And the mate seems to be. That clears everything up, as far as I can see."

"Isn't it funny?"

"Very. I don't understand it at all. The warning came in good faith. And, as I told you, from a reliable source."

She laughed softly.

"You sound as though you are disappointed that things look so good. I believe you are disappointed. You want something to happen."

"No. You're wrong there. When things happen in this part of the world they are liable to be messy. It's quite orderly and all that, you know, but when things get out of bounds, the fat is in the fire."

"It sounds thrilling."

"Not at all. You wouldn't be thrilled, I can promise you. Frightened half to death, probably."

"Is that so?"

"I'm afraid it is." Somerset spoke with a little more conviction than he held, knowing that it would get under her skin.

It did. She said defiantly:

"I wouldn't! Just because I am a woman is no sign that I weep all over the landscape every time something goes wrong."

"I thought they all did," Somerset said with amusement.

"I hope I have a chance to show you!"

"I hope you don't," Somerset said sincerely. "I'd much rather take your word for it."

They stopped by the starboard rail. There, back of the stern of a lifeboat, there was a little sheltered nook, and they slipped into it and looked over the side at the phosphorescent lights in the water.

"I've been wanting to come out to this part of the world ever since I was a girl," she said slowly. "It has always fascinated me. The China Sea. Pirates. Jungles. Malays running amok and killing everyone in their path with a big sword. What is it called?"

"A kris."

"That's it. I've read about them time and again. I really should have been a boy I suppose."

Somerset chuckled.

"You *have* been reading things. I'm sorry to puncture your dreams; but this part of the world is pretty orderly. Has to be. Or the white people couldn't live here. Of course, China always has some trouble, but it's usually been confined to the natives, until this last big burst. As for pirates—the old days of the China Sea ladrones are over. Their fleets were sunk and thousands beheaded about the time of your Civil War. Steam vessels chased them off the seas. You're way behind the times."

"Just my luck!"

Somerset chuckled at the way she said it. Like a disappointed little boy.

They heard steps come down from the bridge and pace measuredly across the boat deck. It was Van Vlick, the captain. He heard their voices and stopped by the rail a moment.

"We haf nice trip," he remarked placidly.

"Looks that way," Somerset agreed.

"*Ja.*" And after a moment the captain went on. He made the round of the boat deck and then went into his cabin. They could hear the door close behind him. Once more they were alone on the deck.

Somerset produced his cigaret case and held it out toward her.

"Have one?" he offered.

"No thanks. I don't use them—yet. Haven't become that emancipated."

Somerset lit his, and thought the better of her for the refusal. He was not a prude about such things, but did like the idea that she did not use them. A boyish girl—without boyish vices.

They fell silent. The low murmur of voices floated up from the after deck. The ship's engines throbbed rythmically.

"Isn't the night lovely?"

"It is," Somerset agreed. They fell silent again.

He shifted his position, and out of the corner of his eye saw a figure come up the after companionway and disappear toward the other side of the deck. For a moment Somerset thought that it was one of the coolie passengers from the lower deck. But the idea passed and he decided it was one of the lascar crew.

He looked across the deck and saw the figure come into sight and go forward, toward the bridge steps. He knew then that it was one of the crew, and turned back toward the rail and asked his companion how long she was going to stay in Singapore.

"I don't know," she answered thoughtfully. "As long as it is interesting, I suppose. I really have no set plans. I'm going to go from Singapore to Penang by rail."

"Good idea. You'll see a bit of the jungle. Quite a bit. I'd advise you to stop off at Kuala Lumpur and take a side trip out to a rubber plantation. Have a look at an open cast tin mine, too, if you can. It'll be interesting."

"I will," she said. And right after that she exclaimed in a startled tone, "What was that?"

Somerset had heard it too.

"Sounded like a choked cry," he said, low.

"That was it! I heard it plainly," she agreed tensely.

They listened. The sound was not repeated.

"It might have come from the bridge," Somerset suggested.

"Sounded like a cough."

"Perhaps. But it didn't sound like a cough to me."

They listened again.

Nothing came to their ears but the muted sounds from the after deck, the low throbbing of the engine down in the bottom of the boat, and the *slap, slap* of water against the steel side.

"Funny how one can hear things and misinterpret them," Somerset remarked. "I remember one night in the jungle, up near the border of Siam. I woke up and heard a noise outside the tent. Thought it——" He broke off and looked at the bridge and listened intently.

Miss Baird followed his glance.

There was a soft scraping sound up there. A dark shadow became visible at the starboard end of the bridge, directly ahead of them. There was a movement at the rail. Part of the shadow lurched out into space.

They saw it drop and hit the water. A distinct splash came to their ears. A ring of soft, phosphorescent lights bubbled into view as the object sank below the surface. They came up to it and looked straight down at a dark blot under the surface. And then it fell astern and the night claimed it.

Somerset caught her arm in a tight grip.

"That was a man!" he whispered tensely.

She stared at him through wide, startled eyes.

"A man?" she whispered back.

"Yes!"

The sharp intake of her breath was like a gasp.

"He—he's dead!"

Somerset nodded.

"No doubt of it. He was dead before

he fell. Or unconscious. He didn't make a sound."

"Wh-what is it? What do you make of it?"

"Don't know," Somerset muttered.

"Can't we do something? What must we do?"

"Tell the captain."

They were speaking in low, tense whispers. Somerset touched her arm again.

"I'll tell the captain about it," he said. "You stay here until I come back. I—I don't like the looks of things. Something wrong. Dirty work."

"Murder? You don't think it is that?"

"Don't know," Somerset told her curtly. "Looked like two men up there on the bridge."

Involuntarily they both glanced there. No shadow was now visible at the end of the bridge. Nothing. Then, as they looked, a match flared out farther over, as though the mate was lighting his pipe. But, instead of being held close to a face, the light was held at arm's length and waved. Up and down. Once. Twice. Three times. They could catch only the vaguest glimpse of the man who held it.

"See that!" Somerset whispered in a husky voice. "Looks like a signal."

"What for?"

"Don't know. Something is wrong. You stay here behind this boat and don't make a sound."

SOMERSET slipped around the stern of the lifeboat and ran lightly across the boat deck to the captain's cabin, on the port side of the deck. Both portholes were open, light streamed forth, and through them came the even hum of an electric fan.

Somerset rapped sharply on the door. Waited a moment, and when the response was not instant, hammered again.

There was a leisurely stir inside. Slippers slapped across the floor. The door opened and Van Vlick's portly form was silhouetted in the light. He wore voluminous pajamas, and in his right hand held a large bowled Dutch pipe from which a generous curl of smoke ascended. He had been sitting in a comfortable chair; on a small wall desk at the right of it stood a bottle, a glass, and syphon. He stood in the doorway, this fat Dutch burgher, and squinted to see who it was.

"Something is wrong!" Somerset shot at him sharply. "A man fell off the end of the bridge. Looked like he was dead. There was a light up there a moment after that looked like a signal. Thought you ought to know at once."

"Eh, mynheer? A man fell off the bridge?" Startled, the captain spoke, and blinked as he tried to assimilate the astounding news.

"Yes. I saw a lascar go up on the bridge. Then this happened."

The captain swallowed, passed his tongue over his lips, then nodded.

"I will see," he stated ponderously.

As he spoke there was a crackling burst of words from the bridge. Chinese speech it was, commanding, forceful.

Somerset saw the eyes of the captain widen and his jaw drop.

"Look out, mynheer!" Van Vlick burst out. Even while he spoke, quickly for a man of his bulk he wheeled to the wall desk and jerked the drawer open. His pudgy right hand plunged in the drawer and came out with a pistol.

He moved so quickly that the pistol was in view almost before the words were out of his mouth.

Somerset. still motionless with amazement, sensed, rather than felt, an object flit past his head. His eyes saw something flash into the lighted cabin. There was no sound. The object went in the captain as though the flesh was soft butter. Somerset saw what it was then. Saw, with a sense of dreadful unreality. A dark knife handle jutted out toward him. The blade was buried deep in Van Vlick's throat.

For a split second the captain stood as though carved from stone. Then the pipe dropped from the fingers of his left hand. The pistol swept around before him as he staggered. It knocked the glass, the bottle, and the syphon from the desk top. They crashed on the floor, and the syphon popped like a muffled pistol shot. Then the pistol dropped also, with a dull thud. Van Vlick raised groping hands to his throat. Gurgled chokingly.

All that happened in a brace of seconds. There had been no other sounds. Somerset's brain, numbed for the moment, flashed into action. He wheeled around.

Not three paces behind him stood a Chinese coolie. In the coolie's right hand was a short, ugly automatic. Coming up behind him on noiseless, naked feet, were two more coolies.

Somerset could just make them out in the outer rays of light that streamed through the open door at his back. Automatics in their right hands, long knives in their left hands, they were a menacing sight.

Coolies from the lower deck, intent on looting the ship! Somerset's heart went cold within him at thought of Miss Baird. Even as he thought, however, he leaped at the man before him.

The blunt nose of the automatic swung up and centered on his chest. Somerset knew that he would die before he touched the man. It did not alter his desperate attack.

From the bridge came a shrill command.

The coolie in front of Somerset dodged nimbly.

Somerset caught the gun wrist, twisted it aside, closed with his man, tripped him, and went down on top. As he grabbed for the gun with his free hand, the first of the other two men reached him.

Again a shrill command came from the bridge.

Somerset had the gun, was wrenching it ruthlessly from the fingers that clutched it.

The first coolie to reach him stepped in closely, raised his automatic deliberately, and brought the end of the barrel down on Somerset's head.

One blow was enough. Somerset collapsed over his man, and then rolled over on the deck.

The coolie sprang to his feet. The three of them looked up at the bridge.

More Chinese was hurled at them. One ran to the steps and mounted to the bridge. The other two picked Somerset up and carried him roughly into the lighted cabin.

Van Vlick lay in a still heap on the floor, and the carpet around him was not nice to look at.

The coolies ignored him. They dropped Somerset's limp form on the bunk, and one of them drew a small hank of silk cord from under his blouse. It was in two pieces. Each man took a length. One bound Somerset's wrists, the other his feet. Expertly they tied him, wrists behind, ankles together, and then drew the ankles up in back and tied them to the wrists.

That took a matter of seconds, so quickly did they work. They left him face downward on the bunk and went out. And as they stood in the light outside the door, a tall figure bounded down the bridge companionway and joined them.

It was the huge, pockmarked Chinese coolie.

He also carried an automatic in one hand and a sharp knife in the other. On the knife blade were dark stains, and on the right leg of the cotton trousers was a dark smear where the blade had been recently wiped.

The man looked through the cabin door, nodded approvingly, snapped a command to the other men and moved toward the after part of the boat deck.

One coolie followed him. The other closed the cabin door, and then took a position at the dark corner of the bridge superstructure, where he could see anyone who tried to go up on the bridge and could command most of the boat deck.

The whole affair had been carried out silently. The *Celebes Queen* throbbed steadily on. Peace brooded over her. The night and the decks were as though nothing had happened.

MISS BAIRD stood behind the stern of the lifeboat and watched Somerset make his way across the boat deck. She saw him disappear around the corner of the bridge superstructure. A moment later a path of light streamed out as the captain's door was opened.

She heard the Chinese words from the bridge. Saw a dark figure creeping toward the light. It entered the rays, became a coolie. She watched, frightened, fascinated, not knowing what to do.

The coolie raised an arm, threw something that glittered. A blade, glittering in the light. A knife! Her heart stilled, for Somerset seemed to be the target.

Then, just after that, Somerset charged into sight. He and the coolie went to the deck. Two more men appeared. One of them swung something at Somerset's head. It struck . Somerset fell limply. Dead, she thought sickeningly. Dead before her eyes as she stood helpless to do anything.

She saw him picked up and carried out of sight into the cabin.

Frozen to the spot, she watched. Presently saw the pockmarked Chinese who had been baiting the caged orang-outang.

There could be no mistake. He stood in the light that streamed forth from the open door, and his figure and face were plain.

He went to the rear of the boat deck, taking a man with him. The cabin door was closed and the deck went dark. A shadowy figure posted itself at the corner.

Miss Baird shrank back behind the lifeboat, her mind a tangle of whirling thoughts. What had happened? What was the meaning of the things she had seen?

Pirates?

It couldn't be! No boats had come alongside. The *Celebes Queen* still plowed steadily forward on her course.

The men she had seen were passengers. Where was the captain? What was the dark object that had dropped off the bridge. Or rather, who was it? Where was Somerset? What had they done with him? Was he alive, or dead?

So the thoughts raced in her mind as she stood silent and unobserved behind the boat. After a bit, the thoughts slowed and she stood there miserably waiting for what was to come next. Her feeling was not exactly fear. Rather apprehension for what had happened to Somerset. He had been a kind man, a likable one. Hard now to think of him dead. So she waited. The dark figure was still posted across the deck. It would not be there without purpose.

During the next fifteen minutes many things happened in other parts of the *Celebes Queen* whose nature could only be guessed by the sounds that floated up to the dark boat deck.

Directly below were the cabins of the engineers, the mates, the passengers. After a short interval a woman's cry of terror came from that region. Once again it burst out; and then abrupt, muffled silence fell.

A moment later came a bellow of anger. Words in Dutch. The sharp sound of a pistol exploding. A door banged. There were other voices. Other pistol shots. Four in all. And again a sudden quiet fell over the *Celebes Queen,* and a soft cool breeze caressed her decks, as though nature was anointing her with peace once more.

Then the stately, rhythmic throb of the triple expansion engine stopped. The *Celebes Queen* glided forward under mere momentum, and the wavelets slapping against her steel hull suddenly took on a startling increase in volume of sound. The shift from engine throb to blank quiet was almost as startling as a pistol shot. It added to the sense of the unreal, the uncanny.

An uneasy murmur of voices stole out from the after deck. The native deck passengers were startled, uneasy, alarmed. Fear was in the sounds that emanated from them, in the very air of the night itself.

Miss Baird, standing taut between the weathered side of the lifeboat and the rail of the boat deck, shivered slightly. What was this mad nightmare that was suddenly and remorselessly drawing in around the *Celebes Quene?* Murder, sudden death, a woman's scream of pure terror suddenly stopped! What next?

Bitterly she thought of the warning that Somerset had given her on the peaceful streets of Port Kali. The warning that she had lightly disregarded. Now, because of her folly, Somerset was dead, and she was standing alone on the open deck of the *Celebes Queen,* defenseless.

Would her cry of terror be the next to steal out across the restless waters of the Malacca Strait? She shivered and swallowed the lump that pushed up into her throat, and felt anything but the reckless young woman who had so cockily told Somerset that she wished for pirates and a chance to show how brave she was. She had been speaking of story book danger. This was real, ghastly, terrible. And it was drawing in on her, closer every minute. Not for long could she hide there behind the boat. Daylight would come. Perhaps, before then, creeping, stealing figures would move across the deck toward her.

She shivered—and rubbed her eyes vigorously with the back of her right hand, and breathed huskily to herself:

"I won't cry! I won't!"

And she didn't, for a miracle, as she waited tensely, and the long minutes marched by, each second a throbbing beat of danger.

Up forward, where the lascar crew lived, shrill Chinese speech burst out. Was answered. The voices rose to a crescendo of wild words. At the height, a gun spoke. Looking forward along the rail she caught the wink of the reflected flash. The voices ceased abruptly. Then one man spoke loudly, authoritatively. After that there was silence in that part of the ship.

THE *Celebes Queen* had lost steerage way and was turned somewhat off her course, so that the slight swell pushed in against her side. She rocked slightly under the impact. *Slup, slup,* the water went; and it seemed to the helpless girl on the boat deck that the sounds might be sardonic chuckles from the deep bosom of that vast body on which the speck of a ship floated.

Quiet lay heavily again, save for the low murmur from the after deck. Would the boat deck be next? Her throat went dry at the thought.

Bare feet padded by on the deck below. Voices spoke, no longer troubling to be quiet. Chinese voices. It seemed to her that she could hear plainly the rasping tones of the big, pockmarked coolie.

She was certain of it a moment later. The voice bellowed out across the after deck. Menacing. Commanding.

When it stopped there was a stir on the after deck, a confused babel of voices. Again the big coolie shouted at them. Shortly after he finished speaking, the sound of hammering rang out. After the hammering there were several dull thuds.

Miss Baird recognized that sound. Heavy sections of hatch covering being tossed on the steel dock plates. That was followed by scraping and shuffling of footsteps. They gradually diminished in volume. Now and then a voice spoke, sounding as though it was muffled by distance. It was not hard to recognize what was happening down there on the after deck. A hatch had been opened and the deck passengers were being sent below.

Finally only the murmur of muffled voices was audible, and then came the sound of hatch covers being replaced.

Another little space of quiet passed. Then the hull of the *Celebes Queen* began to vibrate. At the stern, water roiled and splashed. Once more the engine ran smoothly, the sea slipped past, and the *Celebes Queen* plowed forward. She straightened out on her course, and what had happened might never have been, save in a dream. But the vivid memories and sight of the shadowy form across the boat deck kept everything real to the girl behind the lifeboat.

Pad of bare feet, a spoken voice, sounded on the after steps. She heard it and shrank farther behind the boat. The feet reached the boat deck and turned forward toward the lifeboat.

Her heart began to race. Was this the end? Her turn next? No weapon to defend herself! No person on whom to call! She threw a swift glance over the rail, at the dark water below. Little soft lights down there, studding the wash of the bow wave. Other things below the surface, too. Strange, strong, terrible things. But—not so terrible as that cry of terror from the missionary's wife; and the portentous silence that followed it. That silence was more terrible than the cry. Better a thousand times the water, than silence—and then the water. She moved over until the cool, smooth rods of the railing pressed into her side. And waited.

The padding steps came closer.

A voice spoke. A grunt answered.

She held her breath.

And then they walked on past, three of them by the sound.

One called something. The man on the other side of the deck answered. A few brief words were spoken. They went up on the bridge.

Miss Baird leaned weakly against the rail and drank in the cool night air. It is no light thing to be driven to the very border line of life and death, to raise one's foot to cross that line and suddenly find the foot can be withdrawn, for a time at least. No light thing, when every nerve is keyed to the snapping point and the heart is hopeless and fear weighs heavily.

The course of the *Celebes Queen* was changed slightly. She noticed it by the shift in the breeze. It had been coming from astern. Now it came from the starboard side, and pushed softly against her right cheek, and bent the plume of smoke over and sent it drifting toward the port side. They were bearing in toward land, slightly.

What did these ignorant coolies mean to do? Beach the ship? Run into some obscure landing place and loot her? Take her cargo and, perhaps, the women, to some isolated pirate village?

Pirates?

Somerset had assured her that the days of pirates were over. That steam had driven them off the seas. That these waters were safe. Yet—piracy had been committed before her eyes. Piracy and cold, bloody murder! And the *Celebes Queen* was edging in toward land!

She waited for what was to come. There was nothing else to do.

FOR perhaps half an hour the *Celebes Queen* ran thus, quietly, peacefully, toward some destination and purpose that was obscure. Then, ahead, just off the bow, a light appeared. It was bright reddish in color, plain, though miles away. As suddenly as it had appeared, it winked out. That spot became blank. But, by keeping her eyes on it steadily, a smaller, fainter light appeared. A masthead light, probably.

The light in the distance drew speech from the bridge, low, hurried.

Then, as abruptly as the distant light had appeared, a similiar one burst out on the bridge of the *Celebes Queen*. A spluttering, flaring torch of reddish fire that spewed brilliant light over the bridge, the decks, and the surrounding sea.

Miss Baird shrank in against the side of the lifeboat. The night had her no longer. If one of the coolies on the bridge looked down at that spot, he would see her without doubt.

For the space of thirty seconds she crouched, hardly daring to breathe. And then the blazing torch was hurled over the end of the bridge. It arched out and down, and hissed as it struck the water. Darkness again settled over the decks.

The bow of the *Celebes Queen* shifted slightly and pointed straight toward the spot where the distant light had appeared.

Minutes fled by, the flat sea miles passed, and the *Celebes Queen* reached the source of the light. It was a two-masted schooner, with sharp, rakish yacht lines. White she was painted and, with bare masts blending into the night, looked like a great swan floating aimlessly on a giant pond.

The *Celebes Queen's* engines were shut off as she approached the schooner. With diminishing speed they drew together. Lanterns winked out on the forward decks of both ships.

Closer they came. The *Celebes Queen* floated slower and finally slid gently up to the very side of the smaller vessel. Their sides rubbed together with a bit of a jar.

The dim yellow light of the lanterns picked out a small group of men on the forward deck of the schooner. Fully a dozen of them, Chinese unmistakably. And as the two boats came together they swarmed up over the low well deck railing of the *Celebes Queen*. In the lead were two bearded men.

Miss Baird, peering over the rail of the boat deck, saw them plainly. Two bearded men—with white skins.

A hail from the bridge was answered by a voice from the deck of the schooner. The engine of the *Celebes Queen* began to turn slowly. She slid ahead. Open water appeared between the two boats. The drifting sailing ship fell behind. Every light on her was extinguished.

While that was happening, staccato speech came from the forward well deck. A deep husky voice boomed out words that could be partly understood. English words! And as the sailing ship fell behind the husky voice said plainly:

"That may be. But there's a lot to do yet. Shape your new course. And let's see what you've got on the upper deck."

Leather soled shoes clumped heavily up the forward ladder.

SOMERSET was unconscious for some time. He came to by degrees. A hazy period, a moment when he was conscious of the pain in his head, and finally a period when he became sensible to the surroundings.

He was lying on his stomach and right cheek, with his arms bound behind and his ankles drawn up and attached to the wrists. An uncomfortable position and one in which he could move very little. He found that out after a trial. He might have rolled, but on one side was the steel wall of the cabin, and on the other the abrupt drop to the floor. He chose to remain where he was.

The place was still brightly lighted. He stretched his head over and looked at the floor. It had not been touched since the last moment he had looked at it. Motionless, on his face, one rigid hand clutching at his throat, was Van Vlick. Around his head lay the scattered fragments of the bottle, the syphon, and the glass.

One glance at the floor was all that Somerset needed. What had once been a man was now clay. He looked away, for the sight was not pleasant.

He could hear the even throb of the engine seeping up through the fabric of the hull. He had no idea how long he had been there on the bunk, unconscious. Perhaps five minutes. Perhaps five hours. The cords around his wrists had been applied so tightly that the circulation was impeded. His hands felt cold, numb, and the wrists hurt. There was nothing he could do about it, however, and he waited, trying to guess the future from what had happened.

The coolies had the ship. No doubt about that. If they had been defeated, he would not now be in the cabin with the body of the dead captain. Having the ship, what were they going to do with it? More specifically, what were they going to do with the passengers, with Miss Baird in particular? It made him sick to think of the slim Yankee girl in the power of the brutish coolies. They had committed piracy. Facing death for that, they were not likely to stop at anything further. The punishment for additional crime could be no worse.

Thoughts of that kind swarmed in on Somerset for the next half hour. The ship's engines stopped. And, after a little, started up again. Shortly after that, steps sounded on the deck outside. The door of the cabin was opened abruptly. Three men crowded in.

Somerset twisted his head and eyed them with amazement. The first two men were white, heavily bearded. Behind them, in the doorway, stood the huge, pockmarked coolie.

The first man, big, powerful, clad in soiled whites, wearing a cap on his head and a short dark beard on his face, ignored Somerset and bent over the figure on the floor.

"Nasty mess," he said in a deep, husky voice. "Wasn't there any way to shut him up without bleeding him like a stuck pig, Soo?"

The pockmarked coolie answered to the name of Soo. He said calmly, in good English:

"He had his pistol. Wu Tong had the choice of shooting him or throwing the knife. A shot would have aroused the ship. The knife was better. Wu Tong is very good with the knife, Mister Myer."

Myer lifted one of Van Vlick's arms, and let it drop to the floor with a sodden thump.

"Getting stiff already," he grunted in his husky voice. "Wu Tong *must* be good with the knife. Damn good! But mighty messy! Throw this fellow over the side. He's no good to anyone any more."

Soo spoke curtly over his shoulder. Three coolies came into the cabin at once. Without an expression on their stolid, saffron faces they lifted the body from the floor and carried it out.

That was the last of Van Vlick. Over the side to the fishes, without the batting of an eye. Who were these men, and what manner of men? Hope that had come with the sight of the white skins fled from Somerset's mind. They needed watching as much as Soo, the pockmarked Chinese. And there Somerset wondered again. Soo spoke English with hardly an accent. He must be a mission boy. Certainly he was no coolie as he had pretended to be.

When the body had disappeared, Myer, the big powerful man, passed his hand over his short, dark beard and looked at the bunk.

"What have we here?" he asked in his husky voice, and the corners of his eyes crinkled until Somerset could have sworn that the man was laughing at him.

"Why don't you untie me and see for yourself?" Somerset retorted tartly.

Myer chuckled out loud this time.

"You don't sound like you care for it," he said jovially.

"Think it's a pleasure to be trussed up like this?" Somerset rasped.

"Well, no. We'll have to do something about it. Soo, cut his ankles loose so he can sit up."

The second white man spoke for the first time.

"Why bother? Let him stay that way. You know he's safe."

This second man was smaller than Myer, wiry of build, with a lean face under a soft, silky beard, thin nostrils, and thin lips that the beard did not quite hide. His eyes were the dominant part of his face. Bright they were, almost glittering, suggesting pin points of light. His speech was quick, jerky; his movements nervous.

Myer waved his hand carelessly and said in his husky voice:

"Let him sit up. If he makes a funny move you can bump him off. That suit you, Creel?"

"I *will* bump him off, too," Creel said jerkily. "First queer move he makes."

Creel wore dirty whites also, and his

hand strayed to the right coat pocket, where a sag and a bulge betrayed a gun.

Soo produced a long knife from under his blouse and stepped silently across the cabin and slashed the cords that tied Somerset's ankles and wrists together.

SOMERSET straightened out, lay there a moment, and then cramped as he was, rolled over and managed to sit up on the edge of the bunk. His injured scalp had left a gory red smear on the sheets, and a crimson blotch on the side of his forehead. He was not a tender sight as he sat there on the edge of the bunk and gave them glance for glance.

Myer smiled through his beard.

"You seem to have had a bloody time of it, too. Did Wu Tong practice on you with his knife also?"

Somerset did not answer.

Soo explained blandly:

"He would have been killed. But I ordered him captured."

"What's the idea?" Creel asked quickly.

"I wanted him."

"Wanted him? What for?"

Soo's slanting eyes smoldered as he looked at Somerset.

"There is much between us," he said slowly. "He must not die until I have had time to wipe the slate clean."

Creel shrugged.

"That's between you. You can have him. He's yours."

"Not until the night is over!" Myer said in his husky voice. "There's no time to settle old scores until then. If you want to shoot him, all right. But if you want some of your damned Chinese torture, you'll have to wait." He turned away and went to the locker in the end of the room, grumbling, "Wonder where the captain kept his booze. I want a drink."

There was utter carelessness in Myer's voice. Somerset knew that he had been condemned to worse than death in that moment. And it had not made the slightest impression on Myer, or his shorter partner, Creel. A cold-blooded pair!

Myer grunted with satisfaction and straightened up from the locker with a square bottle of gin in his hand. He drew the cork with his teeth, tilted the bottle and pulled deep at it. Savoring the taste in his throat, he stood there and gestured with the bottle.

"What about the rest of the people?" he asked curtly of Soo. "Hurry up and tell me. We might not have much time."

Soo inclined his head.

"There was no trouble," he said calmly. "We surprised everyone. Several of the officers were aroused by a woman's scream and had to be shot at once. The rest are tied up. The lascars on watch below, and the engineer, are working under guns. The engineer was shot in the shoulder, but is still able to give directions. The rest of the crew are secured forward in their quarters. The deck passengers are under the rear hatch."

"You said something about a woman's scream," Creel reminded jerkily at that point. "Where is she?" He waited with interest and his eyes seemed to flame brighter.

Soo shrugged.

"It was the elderly wife of a missionary. She is in their cabin, tied."

"Oh." Creel's voice was flat. He turned to Myer and reached for the bottle. Myer gave it to him.

Creel drank deep and choked a trifle over the strong liquid. He handed the bottle back, swallowed and turned to Soo again.

"Was that all the women?" he demanded, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

"There was one other. A white girl."

"Where is she?"

"Somewhere about the ship. We did not run across her. There was too much to do to think about her. She can't get away."

"Find her. Bring her here."

Soo stepped to the door and gave an order.

"Don't hurt her," Creel warned.

Myer pulled at the bottle again and shook his head.

"None of your tricks," he cautioned Creel. "This is a business night. Get me?"

Creel frowned.

"This is my business."

"Mine too, if it endangers my plans," Myer said through his beard.

"It won't."

"It better hadn't." Myer's eyes crinkled at the corners and he looked as though he was going to chuckle again. It had an immediate effect on Creel. That shorter man lost his pugnacious air and said almost meekly:

"Don't worry, Tom. Everything will be all right. I just wanted to look at the girl."

Somerset spoke at that point, evenly.

"That's all you had better do."

Creel wheeled on him viciously.

"Close your mouth! I'll do anything I want to. You're lucky to be alive yet."

Somerset was helpless and had to take it. He knew that Creel's words were true. These men seemed to care little for life. Their own included. They had earned a death sentence already and seemed to think nothing of it.

Somerset had faced death too many times himself to be panic-stricken at his present predicament. He accepted the facts as they were; and now tried to make the best of them, to see some way out.

What was the meaning of everything? Why should they want possession of the *Celebes Queen?* She did not have a cargo that would do them any good. It was too bulky to be hidden long or disposed of with safety. As far as Somerset knew, there was no treasure on board. Besides, these men did not seem to be after anything that was on the ship. They had possession, and now were resting content.

It must all have been planned far in advance. And some part of the plans must have been known to Sam Wat Li, of Port Kali. No wonder he had warned his good friend to stay off the *Celebes Queen!*

Somerset asked abruptly:

"What are you chaps after, anyway? What do you intend to do?"

Myer threw his head back, tipped the square bottle up again and drank deep. He handled it well and laughed when his throat was clear.

"What do we intend to do?" he repeated.

"Yes."

Myer waved the bottle and chuckled in his short, dark beard.

"Great things," he said cryptically. "You will see before the night is over."

Creel started to speak then, and Myer waved him down.

"Bad luck to boast of what you are going to do," he reminded. "Do it—and then talk."

Soo, standing by the door, turned his head and looked out. A moment later he stepped aside. The same three men who had carried out the dead body of the captain appeared, bringing with them the slim Yankee girl, Miss Baird.

It was all the three of them could do to push her along. She was fighting each step of the way, silently, but with every last atom of her strength.

They got her through the door with some difficulty. And when she saw Somerset sitting on the edge of the bunk, she stopped struggling and stood there, white faced, breathing heavily.

The two men who held her, one to each arm and one behind, were sorry looking. Two of them bore deep scratches on their cheeks and the third had a nose bleed. But they had carried out instructions and refrained from injuring her. One of them spoke to Soo, and he translated for Creel and Myer.

"They found her behind one of the lifeboats on this deck."

She ignored the passage of words and gazed at Somerset, wide eyed.

"I thought you were dead!" she panted.

He smiled wryly.

"Not much better than that. They seem to have me good and fast."

"What is the meaning of all this? Wh-what are they going to do?"

"I don't know," Somerset had to tell her.

She swallowed and took a deep breath, plainly fighting for control. She succeeded, smiled wanly and declared:

"I haven't c-cried yet!"

"Good girl! Keep it up."

That was all Somerset was able to say, but he felt more like crying himself at that moment. It touched him deeply to see this slim girl, so helpless yet so brave. A thoroughbred if there ever was one.

Creel was inspecting her, his eyes flaming brighter than ever, his thin nostrils twitching slightly. Somerset felt a mad desire to throttle the fellow.

Myer saw his partner and warned in his husky voice:

"No funny business, Creel! Not until the night is over, anyway."

Creel nodded, and bit his thin lower lip and said jerkily:

"Let me have that damned bottle!"

Myer gave it to him, and declared suddenly:

"I have it! I will use them in—in our business. They will lend atmosphere. Give the finishing touch to everything. They, and the two missionaries."

Creel laughed mirthlessly.

"Not a bad idea," he agreed.

From the doorway Soo spoke silkily, his brutal, pockmarked face blank.

"Afterwards I will get my man? It is understood?"

"Yes," Myer agreed. "I said so, didn't I?"

Creel started to take another drink. Myer reached out and took the bottle from him.

"Enough," he stated. "You will need a clear head for the rest of the night. Let us go on the bridge."

Creel started to protest, thought better of it and remained silent.

Myer jerked his head at Miss Baird.

"Lock her up in the chart room," he ordered. "Keep this man in here. They will both be safe until we need them."

The coolies on each side of the girl took her arms. She stiffened.

"Might as well go," Somerset cautioned from the berth. "They can force you. No use in wasting good strength."

She saw the point and, chin up in the air, went out with the coolies.

Soo, Myer, and Creel went out also. The door was closed. A key turned in the lock. That key looked like they had gone through Van Vlick's pockets before they tossed him over the side.

PERHAPS an hour passed. The *Celebes Queen* throbbed steadily on. Somerset sat on the bunk and thought. What was next? What was the end for them both? Who were Myer and Creel? How were they mixed up with Soo and his Chinese? Where did Sam Wat Li fit in? Or did he fit in? Knowledge did not necessarily mean participation. Would his name help?

Somerset doubted the last almost as soon as it occurred to him. Use of Sam Wat Li's name would probably only get the wily old merchant into trouble. Might even draw a bullet or a knife for him.

Again, without warning, the ship's engines stopped. The *Celebes Queen* lost headway and finally floated motionless on the water.

"What now?"

Somerset lunged to his feet, hopped awkwardly across the width of the room, leaned against the wall, and looked through a port-hole. Just within his range of vision he could see the distant lights of a ship.

As he looked, the *Celebes Queen* drifted around and he got a better view. It was a passenger steamer, by the number of lights that was visible. A good sized one, too. Somerset didn't know which direction the *Celebes Queen* was heading at that moment, so he couldn't tell whether the other ship was outward or inward bound. Anyway, there she was, off there in the night, steaming on a course that would bring her right up to the *Celebes Queen*.

On the other side of the boat deck there was a sudden bustle of activity. Feet pattered. Soo's voice issued staccato orders. Myer shouted from the bridge. Boat tackle creaked.

They were lowering the lifeboats!

What for?

Somerset was still beside the port-hole, trying to solve the new problem, when a key grated in the door lock. The door was jerked open. Myer stepped in.

"So? Looking out, eh?" he said briskly.

Somerset did not reply.

Myer hardly waited for an answer, if, indeed, he expected one.

"Listen!" he uttered, briskly, sharply. "Don't miss a word I say. It means your life!"

He paused a second to let that sink in, and raised a hand and emphasized his words with abrupt jabs at Somerset.

"You, the girl, the two missionaries, are going to be put in a boat. You will be rowed away from the ship. No matter what happens, not one of you must utter one word. The men guarding you will have orders to kill the first one who makes a sound. They will, without question. Is that clear?" He stared at Somerset; his eyes were two slits now and there was a dark scowl on his forehead.

Somerset had seen enough of this man and his partner to know that they made no idle threats. Myer's words were clear enough. So Somerset nodded, and asked quickly:

"What's coming?"

"None of your business!" Myer snapped. "Remember, not one word. The others will be warned also. The rest is up to each of you. Do as you are told, also. There is no time to bother with you people now. The troublesome ones will be removed on the spot."

The big fellow snapped his bearded jaws

on the last words, wheeled and went out as abruptly as he had entered.

Somerset stood there digesting it all. In a boat, away from the ship! Men with them! Enforced silence!

What, in the name of all that was reasonable, was the meaning of everything?

His thoughts were cut short as the door was opened again. A coolie entered like a shadow, carrying a sharp knife in his right hand. He came straight to Somerset without a word.

Somerset watched warily, nerves on edge. There was too much killing going on for a knife to pass unnoticed.

But the coolie only dropped down at his feet, slashed the cords that held the ankles together and stood up again.

"Come," he said, and took hold of Somerset's elbow.

There was nothing to do but obey. Somerset went with the man.

Through the doorway they went, outside on the open boat deck. In a sweeping glance Somerset saw that the passenger ship was visibly nearer.

In silence he was led to the other side of the deck.

The two lifeboats on that side were swung outboard, even with the rail. Half a dozen oil lanterns filled that section of the deck with a dim, yellowish light. Dark skinned Chinese, to the number of fifteen or twenty were there, silent, wraithlike. Yet each man was singularly alert and seemed to know what he was doing and why.

Miss Baird was there, too. Somerset picked her out a few feet away. Her wrists had been tied behind her, as were his, and she also had a silent attendant who carried a drawn knife.

Their eyes met.

She nodded, and Somerset saw that she wanted to speak but dared not. He tried to smile comfortingly at her and must have succeeded, for she smiled slightly also.

While they waited there, the missionaries were brought up from the lower deck. Their wrists were tied also, and there was but one guard for the two of them. They were both rather fleshy, about fifty years of age. Fright had etched deeply into their faces, and now they seemed in a bit of a daze. Neither tried to speak, nor to exchange glances with Somerset or Miss Baird.

Myer strode up, and after him came Soo.

"There," Myer said, pointing to the after boat. "Put 'em in there and get 'em away from the ship. Hurry up!"

Soo spoke in crackling dialect.

Somerset, Miss Baird, and the missionaries were taken to the after boat and helped over the side into the stern. The three guards and a fourth man got in with them.

The boat was lowered evenly by the Chinese on the boat deck. It made a good landing on the water, the tackle was cast off and they floated free.

The four white prisoners were in the stern. The four guards took seats nearer the bow, facing them. Each of the four took out an automatic, laid it on the seat by him and then unshipped an oar and fitted it in place. Stroking easily, they rowed away from the *Celebes Queen*.

A hundred yards or so they went, and then the men stopped rowing and they drifted. Behind, on the *Celebes Queen*, the other boat filled with men. Silhouetted against the lantern light, were Myer, Creel and Soo. All of the men but two or three were with them.

"All set?" Myer called loudly. And followed it with the order, "Lower away!"

His husky voice came through the night clearly, and the creak of the falls followed. That boat made the water all right also, and cast off and rowed away from the *Celebes Queen*. It passed the first boat and kept on fully a hundred yards farther. At that point it stopped also.

The lights on the deck of the *Celebes Queen* went out. All sign of the men who had been left there vanished. The huge bulk of the *Celebes Queen* and the lesser dots of the two lifeboats floated silently on the starlit surface of the calm sea.

THEY were directly in the course of the approaching passenger ship. She was uncomfortably near now, looking larger than ever from the tiny lifeboats. Her green and red running lights were both visible, winking out from the dark bulk of the superstructure like fantastic, unmated eyes.

Everything was fantastic, Somerset thought, as he sat on the stern seat of the drifting lifeboat and tried to make something out of what was happening.

He judged that it was somewhere around midnight. A fitting time for the situation. Murder and mystery and hovering menace. Never for an instant did that sense of ever-present menace vanish. It couldn't, faced with the thought of the dull black automatics lying on the seat beside each of the Chinamen, and the orders they had to kill at the first sound.

It hardly seemed possible that one little spoken word would bring instant death and burial in the dark waters that moved restlessly just over the side. Somerset was swept by a terrific desire to say something —anything. He dallied with the idea in the same way that a man with a sore tooth might touch it time and again with the tip of his tongue, or look out of a high window and think in fascination about the consequences of a leap.

A deep, hoarse bellow from the whistle of the approaching boat brought him away from the subject.

After a moment another whistle came.

Before the sound of that had died away across the silent waters, a flare was lighted in the other lifeboat. High, it was held and waved.

Short blasts from the whistle announced that it had been seen.

Somerset's eyes turned toward the *Celebes Queen* at that moment. In spite of himself he almost uttered an exclamation that would have cost him his life. Clouds of dense smoke were coming up from the forward deck of the ship. It was plainly visible in the starlit night. Long streamers of the smoke rolled out over the water, writhing and curling in fantastic shapes.

A searchlight glittered out at the top of the oncoming ship. A long, bright finger of light leaped through the night and splashed the lifeboats with dazzling rays. In the other boat Myer stood up and waved his cap wildly.

The light centered on him a moment and then swept across the water to the *Celebes Queen*. It stabbed her dark, deserted decks with light and gave warm life to the writhing streamers of smoke that rolled up from the forward deck.

Almost impatiently the light searched over the *Celebes Queen*, and then came back to the lifeboats.

Somerset looked on in amazement.

They were going to be picked up by the large passenger vessel. No doubt about that. The *Celebes Queen* had been set on fire and abandoned—with many living people on board. Were Myer and Creel madmen?

It looked that way. Certainly no one but madmen would do the things they had done, and then go deliberately to their capture.

One minute's speech between Somerset and the captain of the ship, would land the pirates in irons. There was no possible way they could get out of it. Even if they hoodwinked the captain, they would be trapped when they got to port. If they were trying to escape, why did they bring the four white captives along? The four who could send them to their death quicker than any others?

He found no answer to any of the questions.

One thing, however, stood out above all else. They were going to be rescued! Saved! It could not be prevented now. They had been discovered. The ship would have to pick them up. Before that fact, a great wave of relief swept over Somerset. Now Miss Baird would be brought out from under the menace of Creel's eyes. He, himself, would be saved the terrible interview with Soo, the Chinaman. Hardened as he was, Somerset did not like to think of what that would have meant. Soo, smarting under his loss of face earlier in the evening, and the incident of the Port Kali dock, would have stopped at nothing.

Nearer, the big passenger ship came, until it seemed a towering, light studded mass that must crush them under. Then it slowed, its engines were reversed and it came to a gradual stop not far off, slightly broadside to them.

The searchlight still played over the spot.

A hoarse voice floated from the high bridge.

"Ahoy there! What's the trouble?"

Myer was standing up in the other boat and he cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted back:

"My ship is on fire . . . Dynamite and oil aboard . . . Explosion killed seven . . . Fire is out of control . . . Saw you coming . . . Got away before we were all killed."

"What's the matter with your wireless?"

"Operator killed."

"Got all your men off?"

"Everyone—passengers and crew. Had to leave the dead ones on board."

"Sure there's no chance of putting the fire out?"

"Absolutely sure. I'll tell you when we get on board."

"Right! I'll have a ladder dropped over the side. Row up closer."

While Myer had been parleying with the captain, his lifeboat had been urged slowly but steadily toward the ship. The four men in Somerset's boat had remained quiet. Now they started to row, slowly, leisurely, barely making progress through the water.

Though the hour was late, passengers were still in evidence on the steamer. They were gathered along the rails, staring at the little drama that was so unexpectedly unfolding before their eyes.

Miss Baird turned her head and looked at Somerset inquiringly. It was plain that she was as puzzled as he about the way things were going. But she said nothing. Somerset kept silent, too. He did not dare speak, even with rescue so near. The automatics were still in evidence by the sides of the four guards.

From the forward deck of the ship, the beam of a flashlight was trained down the steel plates of the side. Along that small path of light a rope ladder with wooden treads was lowered. Myer's boat headed toward it, the men rowing briskly.

THEY came to the side of the ship. Oars were taken in. The boat bumped against the bottom of the rope ladder and willing hands grasped it.

Soo started up at once. His figure was plain in the flashlight rays that were cast down from the deck above. In his right hand Soo bore a small cloth bag whose well filled sides bulged out roundly.

A second Chinese followed Soo, and he also bore a well filled bag. The bags were weighty and handled awkwardly on the swaying ladder of rope and wood, but each man held firmly to his burden and climbed up.

And so did the third man, and the fourth, and the fifth. It looked as though each one was salvaging his personal effects. Every man who went up the ladder carried one of the small bags. Last of all mounted Creel and Myer, and they, too, carried bags. One man stayed below in the empty boat and made it fast to the bottom of the rope ladder.

The rescued men were helped over the rail and mixed with the people who clustered around to receive them. When Myer started up last, a hail came from the bridge.

"Bring that other boat in to the ladder. Hurry up!"

Instead of obeying the four coolies at the oars rested on them and stared at the ship. They seemed to be expecting something.

The hail came again.

"Bring that boat in to the ladder. What's the matter down there?"

The four Chinese paid no attention to the words.

Myer reached the top of the rope ladder. Hands helped him over the rail. He blended with the other figures that stood there. The coolies watched intently. Somerset followed suit.

The deck lights were on. What happened in the next few minutes stood out like a scene on a stage perched high in the air.

The rescued men were taken to the passenger deck amidships. There they blended with the passengers.

Abruptly, Myer's husky voice rose in a loud order.

"Let's go!"

Sudden confusion broke out on that deck. The figures began to mill aimlessly about. Strangled cries were uttered. Hands pawed at eyes and faces. And after a little of that they began to stagger, sink down, and collapse on the deck.

Watching from the small boat on the surface of the sea, Somerset could hardly believe that he saw right. Those who had been standing erect, alive, and well, were now wilting down and collapsing as might field flowers under a fiery blast of heat. The strangled cries died away.

Some figures remained standing. They looked unnatural, with queer enlarged, monsterlike heads. Some ran up to the boat deck and made for the bridge. Some vanished in the interior of the ship.

A loud, harsh order came from the bridge. A strangled shout that died away and was not repeated.

Silence took possession of those decks up there in the air.

Somerset stared, dumbfounded. This night of ultimate surprises seemed to be capped by a newer, greater surprise at every turn. What had happened up there? What was going to happen?

The four Chinese rested on their oars and watched placidly. The four prisoners in the stern watched also, but with tensed, strained emotions. Their lives were at stake. They who had been doomed to almost certain death, and then brought up to safety, now were seeing that safety fade away again. And they dared not utter the thoughts that seethed within them.

A little later there was a muffled explosion from some point in the upper structure of the ship.

Silence fell again.

Then two more explosions sounded from a spot that could not be determined. They were fainter, could barely be heard.

More drawn moments of waiting dragged past.

Then men appeared at the head of the ladder, called down to the man in the boat, and began to lower a dark object at the end of a rope. These men had the queer, bulging heads that Somerset had noted when the first disturbance was at its height.

Into his mind flashed a vision of a gray, misty dawn. A war torn village. Wild sound of alarms. Hasty rush to don protection against—*gas!*

The men up there at the rail were wearing gas masks!

That explained the sudden wilting of the passengers. The absence of fighting. The sudden quiet that had fallen over the ship. The crew and passengers had been gassed. The men who had come over the side had donned gas masks and protected themselves. The masks, the gas containers and other things they needed, had been concealed in the bags that they had carried up.

The man in the boat received the bundle that was lowered to him and cast off the rope. It was drawn up again and another bundle sent down. Several times that was repeated, as hastily as possible. Then a larger object was passed over the rail and lowered. A man it was this time. Limp, unconscious, or dead. He made no movement, and was received into the boat as though he were merchandise.

That was the last.

Down the swaying rope ladder trooped man after man, taking the steps rapidly. Down they swarmed, the Chinese, Soo, Myer and Creel. The deep laden boat was pushed off, oars put out, and the boat headed for the drifting bulk of the *Celebes Queen* as fast as the men could drive her.

The four Chinese who had been resting motionless on their oars, sat up abruptly and came to life. They too began to row rapidly back to the *Celebes Queen.*

IN THE moments that had passed, the billowing smoke had died away. Now only wisps of it were rising up from the forward deck and blending into the night. That, too, had been stage managed. Everything had. Nothing but a long, well planned scheme could run off as smoothly as the events of the evening. And now more was to come. They were going back to the *Celebes Queen.* To Myer, and Creel—and Soo. Somerset's throat felt tight and dry. Not for himself. For Miss Baird. It was sickening to think of what awaited her.

Lights once more appeared on the boat deck of the *Celebes Queen,* and the dim figures of the men who had been left behind were seen against them. The tackle still dangled down from the boat davits. Myer's boat got there first, made fast to the tackle, and the men in the boat hauled it up out of the water and to the rail of the boat deck.

And then the boat with the prisoners reached the dark, towering side, and the Chinese guards caught the dangling falls and made them fast at bow and stern, and the men above hauled the boat up.

Almost before it was clear of the water, the engine of the *Celebes Queen* began to turn. By the time it was level with the boat deck rail the *Celebes Queen* was pushing through the water, and the light spangled mass of the silent passenger ship was dropping astern.

Most of the men who had been in Myer's boat were standing there on the deck, and hands reached out and helped the prisoners out of the lifeboat. Myer and Soo were not visible. Creel was there. He came to them and rasped:

"You people come below in the dining saloon. That's the best place for you, I guess."

He led off, carrying a lighted lantern. They followed, and the three Chinese guards came after.

The saloon was on the deck below, a room running the full width of the ship, with two good sized tables in the center. Creel led them in there, waved his hands at the red plush seats around the nearest table, and said shortly:

"Sit down."

There seemed to be no reason for keeping the enforced silence any longer. Somerset spoke out boldly and asked Creel if they could talk.

Creel shrugged.

"Suit yourself," he growled. "But don't try any funny business. These men will stop it in a hurry."

He went out without saying more. The four prisoners settled themselves awkwardly around the table. The three Chinese guards seated themselves on a plush covered bench against the rear wall.

Miss Baird was the first to say anything. She looked at Somerset, managed to smile weakly and said:

"Well—here we are back again."

"Yes," Somerset agreed. "Back again."

It hovered over them like a gray, depressing blanket. The mouth of the portly wife of the missionary quivered, and she began to sob.

"We'll be killed!" she wailed. "I just know it! We'll all be killed by these monsters!"

Her husband mumbled to her, tried to soothe her, but had little success. Indeed the good man looked as though he were on the verge of crying, himself. Certainly he had no optimistic convictions that they would be rescued now.

The sight of so much misery on the other side of the table did not draw Somerset and Miss Baird into a like state. It had the opposite effect. Miss Baird managed a real smile and spoke to them with a degree of lightness in her voice.

"Cheer up, you two. Don't hunt for trouble so hard. We aren't dead yet. If they had wanted to kill us, they would have, long ago. Look at the way we're guarded. That means they want to keep us. So—there. Laugh it off."

"They killed a man just outside our stateroom," the lady across the table sobbed. "I saw him fall. I'll never forget it. These terrible creatures! What are they doing? It's just like a nightmare!"

Somerset tried some of Miss Baird's treatment on them.

"Nightmares always have an ending," he said lightly. "After the nightmare, the bright morning. As Miss Baird says, laugh that off."

The sobs did die away after a few moments. The man and wife slumped in their seats and looked gloomily at the bare surface of the table.

Miss Baird took a little breath and looked at Somerset.

"What do you make of it?" she asked quietly.

"Piracy. That's all it can be. And a smooth, well planned piece of work. They knew just when this boat would leave Port Kali, and just when the other ship was due down through the Straits. Everything was planned to synchronize—and did. They'll be making their getaway now."

"Where to?"

"Hard to say. Offhand, I'd think the nearest land. I can't figure yet where these two white men came from. They weren't on the ship, I'm certain."

"I can tell you that." Miss Baird did, describing how she had crouched on the boat deck and witnessed the meeting with the sailing vessel.

Somerset nodded when she was through.

"That clears it all up then. It explains how they were able to get the things they needed without risking discovery, and then commit such an act of piracy with any chance of getting away. They'll be making back for the sailing ship. This vessel is a marked one. She won't be safe in a few hours more. It will mean certain capture to stay with her."

"Perhaps they'll get off her, and leave us here to be set free by whoever finds the boat."

"Perhaps," Somerset agreed. But there was no agreement in his heart. Such an idea was absurd. They all knew too much, would be able to give information that probably would lead to capture. No. The idea was not reasonable, on the face of those facts. And there was the added matter of Soo and Creel. Soo, his mind intent on revenging a deadly insult. Creel, cold, lustful, without scruple or restraint—save when Myer spoke out. Somerset fell silent before the thoughts of what was to come.

IN THAT silence the door of the saloon opened and a man strode in. Somerset did not recognize him at first. A big man in soiled whites, smooth shaven, with strong jaw, full lips, and little crinkles at the corners of cold, staring eyes. Some of his astonishment must have shown on his face. The crinkles around the cold eyes deepened and the big fellow spoke in a husky voice:

"Yes. It's me."

Somerset got him then. It was Myer, with his dark beard clipped and shaven.

Myer had a bottle of whisky in one hand and a small canvas bag in the other. He set the bag down on the table with a thump, and stood there holding the bottle.

"Didn't recognize me at first, did you?" he demanded huskily, and with evident satisfaction.

Somerset shook his head.

Myer grinned.

"If that's the case, I guess the people on the other boat who got a half look at me in the night. won't be able to describe me now."

Somerset had to admit to himself that it was true. But he did not give the fellow the satisfaction of open agreement.

Myer waited a moment, and when he saw there was not going to be a reply, he uncorked the bottle and drank from it.

"The skipper of this ship knew good whisky," he stated, smacking his lips and relishing the drink.

He would have said more, but at that moment the door of the saloon opened again and another man entered. Somerset recognized Creel; but a different Creel from the man he had seen last. The soft beard had been removed. The lean face looked sharper, the thin nostrils and lean lips gave a cruel, hawklike cast to the features that the beard had in a measure hidden.

Myer turned his head, saw who it was, and held the bottle out.

"Have a long one on luck," he invited in his husky voice.

Creel took it, drank, and choked a little. He did not seem to be able to handle strong drink like his big partner.

He handed the bottle back and grinned.

"Luck is right. No more work for us, eh?"

"No more. The stuff in that bag will keep us—even if the gold bars don't bring in a cent." Myer stepped up to the table, set the bottle down and picked up the canvas bag. It was fair sized and well filled. He loosened the strings that held the top shut and emptied the contents out on the table.

Somerset heard Miss Baird give a slight gasp. He almost did the same himself. Before their eyes was spread the ransom of a king. Pearl necklaces, rings, other assorted jewelry, thick wads of English bank notes of large denominations and almost a double handful of unset diamonds. The rays of the light overhead struck down on the diamonds and glanced off the facets in countless little flashes of dazzling brilliancy.

Creel's lips went bloodless as he pressed them together tightly and stared at the pile of wealth. Then the thin lips drew apart in another grin.

"Damn my hide!" he said softly. "Look at it! I didn't have any idea there was so much stuff in the safe. Look at it!" He leaned over and plunged his hands into the mass and fingered through it with nervous movements. "All stuff that will go easily. Why—why, we'll be fixed for life."

"I told you so, didn't I?" Myer said with satisfaction. "That boat always has a fine passenger list, and they leave everything with the purser. And valuable shipments of jewelry are usually routed on her. Even without the gold bars she carried this trip, there'd be a good haul almost any time."

Creel picked up a fistful of the unset diamonds and poured them from one hand to the other.

"Look at the sparkling devils!" he exclaimed admiringly. And then he laid them down, and picked out a large one and held it out to Miss Baird.

"How would you like to have that set in a nice ring?" he asked.

She stared at him coldly and did not answer.

"How would you?" Creel insisted.

She looked away.

He tossed the stone back with the others and chuckled.

"No need to get so uppity about it, my dear. You'll learn to like me."

"Lay off that!" Myer growled.

"Dry up! The work is over. This is my party now."

Myer shrugged.

"All right. Have your party. But don't let it interfere with our business. There's a lot to do yet before we get away clear."

Somerset spoke out, driven by the anger and helplessness that he felt.

"Even a pirate doesn't have to act like a beast! Why don't you men stick to piracy and let helpless women alone!"

"Shut up, or I'll shut you up!" Creel snarled.

Myer raised a hand and silenced his partner. He looked at Somerset with a slight smile on his full lips.

"So—we are pirates?" he asked.

"What else?"

Myer thought that over a moment. And then chuckled slightly.

"You'll have to admit we are good ones."

"Perhaps. Are there good pirates? Does this man sound like a good one?"

"Well—good at piracy."

Somerset was so angry that he was heedless of his own safety.

"You've had a little success," he flung at Myer. "It won't last! You'll be run down and hanged like a rat. The other ship will have warnings out before daylight, unless you killed them all off."

Myer shook his head.

"No. They will recover. A few hours of unconsciousness. Then a sick period, and then recovery. They will float until they are picked up. We destroyed the wireless and blew the insides out of the two turbines. The ship is helpless. And we brought the captain along with us, and left a written warning that if radio calls were picked up by our wireless, his future would be—very grave."

"You mean you'd slit his throat!"

"No. Not so messy as that," Myer denied with a husky chuckle. "I do not like the sight of blood. There are other ways that are much neater."

"Both of you are as crazy as bats!" Somerset told him bitterly. "You'll hang for this night's work as surely as the sun rises."

"No. I. think not."

"You will! You can't hide a ship like this very long. There'll be a trail, no matter where you leave it. You'll be run down."

"No. The man isn't living who can track us from this ship." Myer was plainly enjoying himself. There was a streak of vanity in the fellow, and he spoke of what they had done and intended to do with actual pride in his voice.

Somerset sneered.

"You talk rot! Where can you leave her so there won't be a clue?"

Myer laughed.

"On the bottom, my friend. How does that strike you? We will open the sea cocks when we leave her. In a little while there will be no *Celebes Queen*. The world will hunt for her—and hunt and hunt and hunt. Meanwhile, we will be sailing away to safety. Two good friends who left Singapore in their yacht, for Calcutta, and who will presently turn up there on schedule. That is all there is to it. Simple, eh?"

White lipped, Miss Baird entered the conversation.

"What about the deck passengers under the rear hatch? What about us, and any other people that are alive on the boat?"

Myer's smile did not abate a fraction.

"What about them? Nothing. They will have to go down with the ship. Unfortunate, but necessary. They shouldn't have come on this boat. We can't afford to let anyone ashore with information about us, you know."

"We know all about you! You—you wouldn't dare to do anything to us!" She spoke passionately. But Somerset sensed the despair in her voice. It was merely the gesture of a gallant spirit, this bravery of hers.

Creel cut in there.

"Of course, we won't let you go down with the ship, my dear. You shall go with us—and have a place of honor on our boat. Don't give it another thought. And this friend of yours, who is so interested in your welfare, is going also. We have a friend of his who is interested in him." Creel smiled narrowly and let his eyes run over her.

"Who—who is interested in Mr. Somerset?" she asked bravely, fighting down her emotions and keeping away from the subject of herself.

"Soo, the leader of the Chinese whom we used," Creel told her softly, and looked from her to Somerset as a cat might survey a pair of doomed mice, seeking enjoyment from their emotions.

If he expected a display of fright and grief he was disappointed. Somerset kept his face blank. She locked her lips and looked away.

While Creel stood looking at them, the door opened for the third time. Soo looked in.

"We have sighted the signal," he said.

"Good!" Myer replied. "I'll be right up on the bridge. Have your men ready to transfer the gold bars. Make arrangements to open the sea cocks of this boat as soon as we get off."

Soo nodded and departed.

Myer hastily crammed the exposed wealth back in the canvas bag, tied it securely, and said shortly to Creel:

"Come on! There's a lot to do yet!"

Creel followed him from the saloon without a retort.

They all sat without speaking for a few moments. Then Miss Baird shuddered slightly.

"I—I didn't think men like them existed. They can't really be going to drown the helpless people on this boat!"

"I'm afraid so," Somerset said.

"They evidently are determined to do it," the missionary agreed from across the table. "The only thing that can help us now is our religion."

His wife nodded silently.

"It looks that way," Somerset agreed. "We're absolutely helpless and at their mercy."

THERE seemed little more to say. A slow half hour dragged past. The ship's engine, which had been running at full speed, slowed. And, a little later, stopped.

A pregnant silence filled the saloon. Somerset and Miss Baird looked at each other. She was pale, but steady. With worse than death hovering over her, she managed a weak smile.

"I know how a condemned man feels as he gets ready to face the chair," she said with an attempt at lightness.

"Keep your chin up," Somerset advised through dry lips. "Never can tell when you'll get a lucky break."

"I'll—make out."

Somerset almost groaned.

"I—I— Gad, it's heartbreaking not to be able to do anything for you!"

"You did your share in Port Kali," she assured him.

The couple across the table were silent. Their eyes were closed, and their lips moved soundlessly.

Soo entered the saloon suddenly, came to the table, and said curtly to the missionaries.

"Come with me."

They stood up slowly. The woman looked at Miss Baird with moist eyes.

"Good-by," she said simply and, in her face and her husband's too, there was a new look of peace and strength.

"Good-by—if it is that."

Soo spoke briefly in Chinese. Two of the guards got up and, as Soo started for the door, and the missionaries followed, they fell in behind.

The door closed behind them and Miss Baird, Somerset, and the one guard were left alone in the saloon.

"I wish I could have the serene faith and comfort they are taking with them," Miss Baird remarked wistfully. "Did you see her face?"

"Yes. I wish it, too."

Myer's husky voice, bawling orders, floated in through the open ports. A little after, there was a slight jar as two ships came together.

THE Chinese guard got to his feet and padded softly around the table and peered out one of the ports.

"If I could only get my hands free!" Somerset raged in a low voice.

"Isn't there any way?"

"Don't see any. Tied too well. Feels like my wrists are coming in two every time I put pressure on them."

The guard turned away from the port and started slowly back to the bench. He was short, slight, with a flattish, saffron face. In open fight Somerset could have disposed of him at once. But here he was master of the situation, and knew it. He had put his gun away, and carried a knife in his right hand. Carried it loosely, even carelessly.

Somerset stared at the man. And, on the spur of the moment, a mad resolution entered his mind. It was folly. Even if successful at first, it could only end in death for him. But, death was coming anyway. Driven by that thought, he threw his life recklessly on the scales of luck.

The bench against the wall was in back of his chair. The flat faced guard sauntered around the table toward it. Somerset swung his chair around and leaned back slightly.

The other came up to him slowly and turned to sit down on the bench.

Somerset drove his right foot up from the floor with all the strength he could muster. It went true. The hard toe of the shoe slammed powerfully into the unprotected side of the man's neck. It was almost possible to hear the neck bones snap.

The fellow dropped the knife, staggered back, careened against Miss Baird, and fell heavily to the floor without a sound. His head sagged to the side at a grotesque angle.

Somerset leaped to his feet as the other went down.

The knife was on the floor at his feet. He bent his knees and managed to catch the handle with his fingers. He sprang up and held it toward Miss Baird behind his back.

"Quick!" he husked. "Cut my wrists loose with this knife."

She was on her feet at once and twisted around and took the knife from him. Back to his, looking over her shoulder, jabbing awkwardly with the sharp blade, she hacked at the strong silk cords which held his wrists.

A voice spoke outside the door.

"Hurry!" Somerset urged frantically.

She jabbed the point into his left wrist in her haste. He held steady and kept his eyes on the door.

The knob turned.

One strand of silk cord parted. Two. Three . . . And as the door wung in, Somerset's wrists came apart and the severed cords dropped to the floor.

Soo stepped into the saloon, and two of his men followed. Somerset whirled, seized the knife from Miss Baird, and faced them.

For a long second Soo stood there by the door and stared, wide-eyed. Somerset on his feet with a knife in his hand. The guard on the floor at his feet. It took a fraction to register.

Soo and his men had no weapons in their hands. But Soo's pockmarked face twisted into a snarl and he plunged his hand beneath his blouse. It came out holding a dumpy automatic.

Knife against gun was no go. Suicide to even try it—as long as there was a better way. There was. Behind Somerset was another door, opening on the opposite side of the ship from the one Soo had entered by.

Discretion was the better part of valor at the moment—if he could make it. Somerset whirled and darted for the door.

Soo raised the automatic hastily. The burst of the report crashed out as Somerset got to the door. The bullet spatted viciously into the door just above his head.

He ducked, tore at the knob, and lunged against the door. As it swung open, the automatic bellowed again. The second bullet went high into the door frame also. And then Somerset was through the doorway, on the open deck.

Behind him, Soo shouted shrilly, and dashed across the saloon.

Somerset did not look around, but he knew they were coming. Knew also that many men were about the decks of the *Celebes Queen*. It really was a forlorn hope. He could not get off the boat, and stood no chance of whipping the lot of them. They would hunt him down like a cornered rat, and either dispose of him on the spot or turn him over to Soo.

There would be no sport for the Chinaman, he resolved grimly, as he ran back along the deck. Better quick, clean death, than slow, lingering sport for this pockmarked brute.

Behind him Soo burst out of the saloon door and yelped aloud as he caught sight of his quarry.

Somerset knew there was no use to seek shelter below. They would corner him down there at once. The few minutes left of life could only be prolonged by keeping to the upper decks. He dashed back along the deck toward the after steps to the boat deck.

Soo shot at him again on the run. The bullet went wide. And again. And once more missed.

Those shots would have aroused all the men on the upper decks of the *Celebes Queen*, and the boat alongside. If Soo did not win out in a few seconds, the manhunt would be on full blast, everyone participating.

He was at the after end of the amidship

superstructure. He was around it. At the bottom of the boat deck steps. Up them three at a time. Out at the top. And, as he leaped on the starlit upper deck, he ran full into a Chinaman who was hurrying to the lower deck.

The shock knocked them apart. The other was not certain for a moment whether it was friend or foe. Somerset knew it could only be an enemy. He had no friends among the free people on the *Celebes Queen*. He attacked the other instantly.

The man held a gun in his right hand. Somerset saw it in the dim light and seized the wrist of that hand as he closed.

It was all over in a few seconds. Somerset was ruthless. He stabbed hard with the long, sharp knife he carried. It went deep in the heart. He jerked it out and stabbed again.

The man that he struggled with suddenly became a resistless bulk. Somerset pushed him aside and plunged forward without waiting to see him drop. Behind, he heard the pursuit at the bottom of the steps.

AT HIS left was a small deckhouse, the wireless room. Beside the right side of the *Celebes Queen* rose the slim masts of a sailing ship. Men were at the forward end of the deck he stood on, crowding down the steps that led to the lower deck. They had heard the noise down there and were responding.

Somerset dodged around the wireless room to the left side of the deck. No one was in sight there. He went to the rail and edged behind one of the lifeboats. For a moment he was out of sight.

He was breathing heavily. His heart was pounding with great throbs that seemed to rack his whole chest. Cold sweat beaded his forehead. But his hands were steady and there was no fear in his heart. He had accepted the death that was closing in on him. Now it was a matter of collecting as great a price as possible for the life they were going to take.

From the bridge Myer bellowed huskily:

"What's the matter?" Then his shoes pounded heavily down the bridge steps.

On the other side of the deck Soo's voice shouted to Myer. They joined each other.

The end was near now. Somerset thought of Creel up there on the bridge. Crafty! Cruel! Lustful! He could not bear to leave that man master of Miss Baird. Not to hold the fate of the slim Yankee girl in his hands. She did not deserve that! Somerset slipped forward in the narrow space next to the rail.

He was able to get opposite the bottom of the bridge ladder unobserved. Four soft, swift steps took him to them. He mounted silently.

Creel was at the other end of the bridge. Somerset made out the figure as he came up on the bridge. He stormed silently across to closer quarters.

Creel must have been dismayed by the sudden attack that burst out of the night at him. He held a gun, and fired blindly with it. Missed.

Somerset laughed savagely, dodged, closed in. He brushed the pistol arm aside and slashed with the moist blade of the long knife he carried. Slashed for the throat—and his aim was true.

Creel wailed chokingly. Dropped the gun. Caught at his gaping neck. Somerset bore hard against him, crowded him to the end of the bridge, and heaved him up. Powerfully he threw the man. Over the end of the bridge into open space.

Down Creel fell toward the deck of the sailing ship. The sodden slap of his body against the hard deck came up faintly.

So much for that! Somerset knew he would go to his death with a lighter heart.

The shot had betrayed his location to the ones below. Soo screamed an order to his men. Myer shouted huskily. They all swarmed for the bridge steps. Somerset could see them over the side of the bridge.

He hesitated. The trap was closing in. He was pocketed there on the bridge.

Pocketed for the time it took his mind to flash over the chances of escape. The steps were impossible. He would meet the pack coming up. One way only was left if he would live yet a little longer. Somerset took it with the recklessness of desperation.

He straddled the end of the bridge. Let himself down. Caught his legs about the narrow support underneath the corner of the bridge. A slip meant a long fall to the hard deck where Creel had dropped. If there was a man waiting underneath he would be shot or knifed at the other's will. Nothing else to do, however. He went on down, chancing what would be there.

Death above, or death below? What did it matter?

Overhead on the bridge feet trampled.

"Where is he?" Myer bellowed. "Look in the wheel-house!"

Somerset's feet struck the rail of the boat deck. He drew himself in and leaped lightly down, ready to face whatever waited there.

There was nothing at the moment. The men on that deck had crowded up on the bridge. But, others were coming up from the deck below. Somerset caught sight of a head and shoulders rising up from the steps a few feet away.

There was no time to fight on that spot. He ran towards the rear of the boat deck. And had not taken a dozen steps when three figures came up out of the rear steps.

Somerset stopped abruptly. No hope to win out against those three armed men. Men in front! Men behind! Trapped! Taking a lesson from his escape from the bridge, he turned toward the rail.

From the bridge came a shout.

"There he is!" Myer cried. "Down on the boat deck! Shoot him."

Somerset got to the rail. The lifeboats had not been swung in again. The one that Myer and his men had used had evidently been in the process of being lowered to the deck of the sailing ship.

It hung nearly even with the deck below. As a gun barked from the bridge, Somerset straddled the rail, thrust the bloody knife beneath his belt, and jumped out to the ropes of the lowering tackle. He caught them easily, straddled them, and slid down, the harsh ropes burning in his hands.

More shots were fired as he went down. One bullet glanced from the rail and spun off into the night. Another plunked into the mast of the sailing ship. The rest went wide in the uncertain light and excitement.

"Down below after him!" Myer ordered loudly.

Somerset's feet came hard on the stern of the boat. He let go of the ropes and leaped down in the bottom. And there he stumbled and sprawled to his hands and knees. The back of his left hand came sharp against the hard edge of a seat. The pain made him grunt. And, as he scrambled to find a footing, he touched the things that had tripped him.

Everything that had been brought back from the passenger ship had been left in the boat, evidently on the theory that it was easier to lower the boat full than take the things out and send them down. He had fallen over a small pile of canvas bags. They were, he knew instantly, the ones that had been carried on the passenger ship. The ones containing the gas masks and gas bombs.

They still did. He felt small hard objects as his hands pressed into the canvas.

Gas masks! Gas bombs!

Somerset seized two of the bags and tumbled over the side of the boat onto the deck of the *Celebes Queen.*

Gas bombs!

Feet were rushing down the steps from the boat deck.

He clutched the bag tighter, ran a few paces to the door of a passage, went down it a little and wheeled to the left into another passage. Along that he raced and dove to the right through an open door.

Hot moist air struck him in the face. He was on a narrow steel grating. Steel steps went down steeply. Below was the top of the big triple expansion engine and the tangle of piping and pumps that filled the cramped confines of the engine room.

SOMERSET had never worked below in a ship, but he knew his way about. He caught the smooth steel railing at the side of the steep steps with one hand, held the bags under the other arm, and went down with a rush.

There was another grating just below the top of the engine. Somerset stopped there and looked down. Through the interstices he could see several forms on the floor of the engine room. They had heard him come down, and were looking up to see who it was.

Somerset made a last bid for life. He stopped there on the grating, dropped one of the bags at his feet, and opened the other. A mask was on top. He jerked it out.

Not an army mask, this one. Different in a good many ways from the ones he had used in France. But a swift glance showed him how the straps worked and he fitted it to his head without trouble.

Peering through the staring glass goggles in the front, he dipped down into the bag and brought up one of the hard objects that he had felt through the side. It was a small oblong container of metal that fitted into the palm of his hand. In the side was a little trigger. He recognized the type, released the trigger and tossed the bomb over the side of the grating. It fell to the steel plates of the engine room floor and disintegrated with a small pop.

He threw another and another. And then gathered both the bags up and moved along the grating to the steps that led down to the floor below.

The gas was colorless. He could see nothing different in the atmosphere. But the figures that had been standing erect were wobbling now. Hands were pawing at blinded eyes, and they were gasping. Even as Somerset started down towards them one crumpled to the floor, and before he reached the bottom the other two followed.

Here was something that was better than guns or knives. It blinded the enemy with tears in an instant, and then struck them down quickly. And did not miss.

Above, there was a shout. A stream of figures poured down the steep engine room ladder. Myer was in the lead.

Somerset reached into one of the bags and fished out the last two bombs it contained. He touched them off, tossed them back of the engine, and ran to the small bulkhead that led into the fire room. The bulkhead door was open, and he closed it after him, all but a crack. Then, in the cramped space between two blistering hot boilers, he fished into the remaining canvas bag and got two more of the bombs. He threw them back into the fireroom and then turned to the bulkhead door, confident that every man in the fireroom would be helpless in a few seconds. Through the goggles in the gas mask and the partly open door, he watched the floor of the engine room.

The gas seemed to be hanging low. The pursuing men were down in it before they realized what was there. Myer was the first. He hit the plates at a run, gripping the butt of an automatic firmly.

And then the gas got him. He dashed at his eyes, gasped, dropped the gun and tried to turn. But he was blinded by the sudden rush of tears to his eyes. He groped, ran into the coolie who had followed him and then began to strangle.

"Gas!" he tried to shout, and the words died, a mere wheeze in his throat. Somerset could barely make them out from where he watched.

The coolie who had followed him was caught also. And still they tumbled eagerly down, the men behind unable to see what was happening below until they were right in it.

Somerset almost chuckled as he saw the gas mow them down. All but the last one. And that was Soo, their leader. He was delayed, for some reason, and he came down a little behind the rest. He caught sight of the blinded movements of the men who had just preceded him, took in the ones who were down on the floor. And he understood the nature of things and bolted back up the ladder.

The tide of luck had changed so swiftly that Somerset could hardly believe it was true. There was now certainty of escape instead of death. Escape—for him, for Miss Baird, for the others on the *Celebes Queen*.

He had no doubt that they would win free now. Creel was dead, Myer unconscious, most of their men rendered harmless. In the engine room were the weapons of the unconscious men. It was all he needed. He opened the bulkhead door wide and entered the engine room.

He had his pick of a number of weapons on the floor of that engine room. Knives and the blunt automatics which seemed to have been supplied to every member of the modern pirate band.

He chose an automatic, and picked it from the side of an unconscious man, and made certain that the clip was filled. On second thought he picked up a second gun and extracted the clip from that, and dropped it in the pocket of his coat. There were three more of the small gas bombs in the second canvas bag. He took them out and dropped them in the other coat pocket. Then, armed, protected against gas, a free man on his own two feet, he went into the fire room.

That dim, dirty, hot hole was devoid of movement. The lascar fireman had all been gassed as he intended, and, with them, a Chinese member of the pirate band, who had evidently been standing over them with a drawn gun. He now was collapsed on a heap of slack coal, and the gun was out of his helpless fingers. The fires burned under the boilers without attention.

Somerset gave them none. Assured that the place was cleared out, he swiftly mounted the steep ladder that led to the upper deck.

WITH each step his heart grew lighter. It was as though he had been walking in cold darkness, and had suddenly come into warm sunlight. He came to the top of the ladders, walked across the gratings, and stepped into the passage that would take him to the open deck.

And then he stopped abruptly.

Not fifteen feet away, in the passage, Soo was approaching. A gas mask over his face, a knife in one hand, a drawn gun in the other, Soo was running lightly toward him.

Somerset stopped on the spot and raised his gun. Soo raised his, also—and the explosion spurted from it quickest.

Somerset was hardly conscious of pain. The gun flew from his grasp. When he looked at the hand, there was spurting blood where, a second before, there had been smooth white skin. Soo's bullet had mangled his hand into uselessness.

Soo's bullet had also killed him!

Somerset knew that instantly. He was doomed! The cold blackness once more closed in about him. He turned and fled back through the door, across the gratings, out the other side to the deck, and back toward the stern. With no weapon, and a mangled right hand, he was helpless against Soo. A lump came into his throat at the thought of all that had been opened before him, and now was suddenly snatched away.

So he fled back along the deck, and behind him on padding feet came Soo. Back, back, down the steps to the after well deck! Back along that! And Soo reached that deck also and fired as he pursued.

Devils of ill luck seemed to be perched on the barrel of Soo's gun now. Once again his shot found a mark. Somerset felt a shock in his right leg, a pain, and knew that he had been struck there.

The next few steps that leg seemed unwilling to work.

Then, indeed, Somerset knew that the end had come for him. But, still battling gamely for life, he lurched over to the first shelter that offered. It was the rattan bound cage which held the great savage orang-outang.

Behind that he hobbled, and saw dimly out of the corner of his eye a great dark bulk rise out of the corner and give attention.

He got to the other corner of that cage before Soo came up, and slipped around it safely before the Celestial could fire at him.

Soo darted after.

The end of the cage was shorter than the length. When Soo got there, Somerset had already hobbled around out of sight.

Like a questing fox, Soo doubled back on his tracks.

The ruse succeeded.

Gasping for breath, weakened from the blood he was losing and the ordeal he had been through, Somerset did not think of that. Looking for an enemy behind, he suddenly saw him leap out ahead.

Somerset stopped abruptly.

Soo steadied himself at the corner of the cage and raised his gun. The movement was deliberate. There was no escape now. Soo moved slowly, that his victim might have time to think about it.

A fateful brace of seconds tolled slowly past. The world seemed to stand still for Somerset. Face to face with the end, he seemed to lose all thought, all feeling, save consciousness of the little black gun that was raising up and pointing at him. He stared at it in fascination.

Soo sighted carefully.

Without warning a long hairy arm darted through the bars of the cage. Powerful fingers fastened on Soo's gun arm and jerked.

Soo screamed with sudden fright as he was pulled toward the cage. And screamed again as a second arm darted out and caught him also. The gun exploded harmlessly into the air. And then dropped to the deck as the mighty grasp snapped the arm bones against the stout bars of the cage.

The orang's snarl of rage rasped loud through the night. He crushed the man who had tormented him in his misery, close against the bars, and his great fingers and terrible jaws worked relentlessly.

Somerset turned away from the sight.

That episode was over, he knew. Retribution had come to Soo in a ghastly form.

By the time Somerset had hobbled to the ladder at the forward end of the deck and mounted to the 'midship section, quiet had fallen behind the cage. Quiet, save for the rumblings that issued from the throat of the jungle beast.

The decks were clear and quiet.

At that point Somerset noticed that the spars of the sailing ship were no longer visible by the side of the *Celebes Queen*. And when he stood there a moment, puzzled, trying to find the reason, he saw a dark blot of spread canvas off in the night, and under it the hull of the boat. It was drifting away in the very slight breeze. And Somerset knew that fear had routed the last several men who might have been a menace.

With that, a sudden thought sent him to the saloon. Had they taken with them the slim, stout hearted girl from the States?

They had not.

He found her in the saloon, walking about restlessly, her hands still tied behind her.

Her eyes widened at sight of him.

"I thought you were dead!" she exclaimed in a tight voice.

"Not I," Somerset told her with a grin.

And to prove it, he held his bloody right hand behind his back so that she might be spared the sight of it, and hobbled about the saloon until he found a bread knife, and with it cut her wrists loose.

And as he hunted, and then hacked awkwardly at her wrists with his left hand, he told her in terse sentences what had happened.

She heard the last as she was standing before him, rubbing her wrists where the tight cords had cut deep.

"You mean some are dead, and some are unconsciousness, and the rest are gone?" she asked at the last.

He nodded.

"And we are safe? And can let the rest of the people free? And not worry any more?"

"Just that. All's bright and chipper now."

"Well—I didn't cry," she told him, and her lips trembled as she said it.

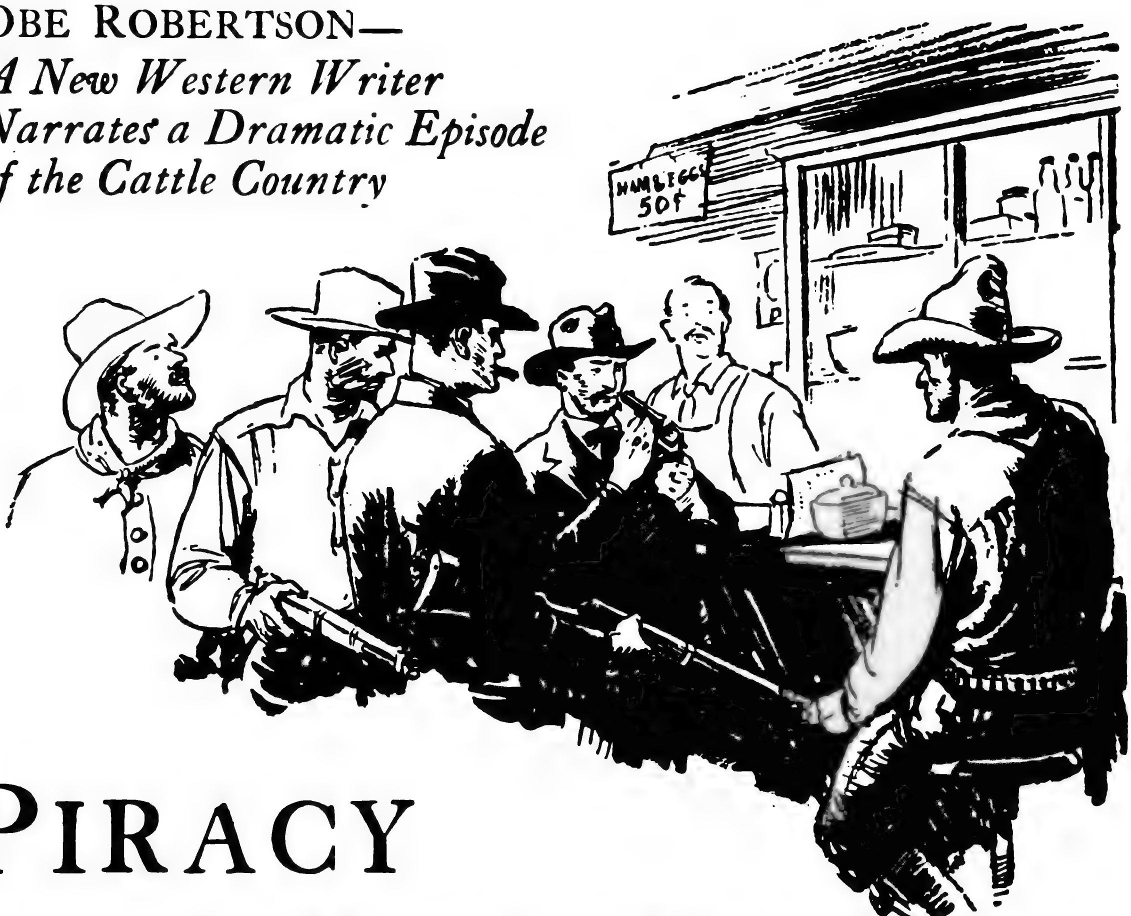
"You were a brick! I'll never forget the way you took it," he told her. And added, in spite of himself, "Or never forget you."

For a long moment they looked into each other's eyes. Then her mouth trembled still more, her eyes moistened, and she took a step toward him.

"I think I'm going to c-cry n-now," she stated. "Can I use your shoulder?"

OBE ROBERTSON—

A New Western Writer Narrates a Dramatic Episode of the Cattle Country



PIRACY At PEBBLE CREEK

THE sale was over at last. The once proud outfit of the 7VF was now only a memory. The ranch and range cattle had been closed out to satisfy a mortgage, and the heirs—Jake, Madge and Kitty Frazier—had agreed among themselves to sell the tag ends, such as horses, milch cows, and machinery, at public auction at the same time. The sale had been fairly successful, and the stuff had brought more than had been expected. But it had been a busy and a strenuous day for Ruffy Mohannan, the one remaining member of a once large and loyal crew.

The last of the crew had departed three months before, and Ruffy's wages were now six months in arrears. All the manual labor of the sale had devolved upon him, and during the day he had wrestled with more than fifty head of unbroken horses, to say nothing of the time and energy expended on broke horses and milch cows in arranging them for auction.

When the last animal had been disposed of, he had squatted on his heels in the shade of the stockyard fence; there he remained, though the last of the crowd had long since departed. He was tired, dirty and disgusted, but he was too angry to feel more than an occasional wave of homesickness.

He had started to work for the 7VF when he was fifteen. It was none too prosperous then, but it shortly began to grow rapidly. Now he was twenty-five. In seven years he had seen the business grow from a tottering, top heavy, debt ridden outfit into the most prosperous one in the country. Then old Jacob Frazier had died, and his wife had followed him a few months later.

Young Jake had returned from school and taken over the business, or more rightly speaking, the check book. Since then the business had rapidly declined. Possessing no business ability, and with an insatiable taste for high living and gambling, he had piled mortgage after mortgage onto the property until any hope of the business paying itself out was reduced to a minimum. Thereafter, when any money at all had come to the outfit, Jake had only gambled the harder in the hope of retrieving the fortune he had lost for his sisters.

For six months now he had not even visited the ranch but had spent his entire time in the tough little town of Pebble Creek in the company of tinhorn gamblers and hangers-on. Since then, no wages had been paid and the crew had gradually departed, until Ruffy was the only one to remain. From top cowhand he had come down to chore boy without wages. In a way he was glad that it was over.

He was sorry for the girls, especially for Kitty, and, of course, resentful towards Jake, but that was too old a feeling to disturb his equanimity. He could not remember a time when Jake and his chosen friends had not aroused in him a feeling of resentment.

Kitty had returned from school to take charge, but as the sale had been held at the stockyards at the edge of town, Jake had taken the responsibilty off her hands. Kitty had soon disappeared; he wondered idly where she had gone. Hiding up in an hotel room crying her eyes out, he surmised. Kitty was feeling the disgrace of the family failure rather keenly. And she had always liked ranch life and everything pertaining to it. The others had not cared for it, but it was only Kitty who had had the courage to bring the thing to a final conclusion.

Ruffy wondered how they would divide the money. Equally, or would Jake have manhood enough to turn it all over to the girls? He doubted it, and decided to put in a bid for his back wages. After all, they were no worse off financially than he was. Three or four thousand dollars apiece would suffice to finish the girls' education, and they would soon be getting married. His meditations were interrupted by a shadow that thrust itself across the corral from behind him. He hadn't noticed that the sun was so low. He glanced up and beheld Kitty Frazier leaning over the top of the corral behind him. She had climbed nearly to the top of the fence and was looking everywhere in the yards except down.

"Hello, Kitty, lost somethin'?" Ruffy asked.

Kitty started and looked down.

"I've been looking all over for you," she said and started to climb on over the fence. She had been crying and her face was drawn and thin, but Ruffy thought she looked prettier than ever.

"I've been here all day," he said as he helped her down off the fence. "It was a pretty good sale after all, wasn't it? How much did the stuff bring?"

"A little over ten thousand dollars, but it might just as well not have brought a penny," Kitty said with a catch in her throat. "Jake is gambling again—" she broke off and started to cry. "Can't you do something to stop him?"

"I might shoot him," Ruffy said grimly.

"Don't joke, Ruffy, please. This is too serious. It's every cent we have in the world. And that Lloyd Hafflin is with him. I wish someone would shoot *him,*" Kitty said almost savagely. "If it wasn't for him, Jake wouldn't be so bad."

Ruffy was not so sure that he had been joking. It seemed to him that a little wholesale murder might not be out of place; he even reflected that if he did decide to have a killing he would clear the atmosphere by making a clean sweep. Half a dozen tough characters wiped out of Pebble Creek would make it a decidedly better place for those that were left.

"Yuh mean tuh tell me that yuh let him git his hands on all that money?" he demanded incredulously.

"Oh, don't scold me," Kitty pleaded. "I never thought he'd do a thing like this. I thought he would gamble away his own part of the estate, but he said he would put our part in the bank for us. Instead of that he got it all in currency, and he and Hafflin are playing poker with that gambler, Slim Johnson."

She became incoherent, and Ruffy led her over to his horse. He attempted to get her to mount the saddle, but she insisted on riding behind, where she could keep her tear stained face concealed against Ruffy's broad back.

The stockyards were half a mile from town, and as they rode slowly toward the main street, Ruffy racked his brain for some method by which he could help; but the situation seemed hopeless. He did not flatter himself that he possessed influence of any marked degree with any member of the family now living. The old man had admired his skill as a cowboy and his steady attention to business;

but, by holding Ruffy up as an example to Jake, he had created a mild sort of antagonism in the minds of the girls. Ruffy had shown his good sense by ignoring it. He was fond of Kitty in a generous, unsentimental way, and lately she had begun to show signs of comprehending and appreciating something of what he had meant to the outfit. He hated to see her the object of pity or ridicule.

In front of the principal hotel he stopped, assisted her to dismount, and followed her inside; but he soon found that any attempt to arrive at a solution of her trouble by conversation was futile. She was almost hysterical and could only reiterate her plea for him to do something. Her gloomy mood was no lighter when he left her and sought the street.

OLD BILL LEEDS, recently appointed foreman of a neighboring ranch and Ruffy's prospective future employer, was waiting for him at the door of the hotel. There was a grin on Old Bill's face, but that was no indication that he was enjoying himself. It was quite the reverse.

"That young whelp is over in the Elk Horn Saloon in another poker game," Bill informed him. "What say we come back after dark and stick the damned place up, and then burn it off the map?"

"That's what we should do," Ruffy agreed amiably. He knew Bill too well to take him seriously. Bill was given to extravagant talk, but there was no denying that his sympathy for the girls was genuine; also, he was a tough old bird with little or no regard for vested authority. It would not do to encourage him too far.

"Anyway, he owes me six months' wages, and I'm goin' tuh collect that if I have tuh do it with a gun," Ruffy concluded.

"If yuh have tuh use a gun tuh collect, you'd just as well git the girls' money, too, while you're at it," Bill said dryly. "If yuh need help, call on me. And don't leave town till yuh see me again. I've got a job for yuh here before we leave."

It had grown quite dark when Ruffy made his way across the street and entered the Elk Horn Saloon. The bar was being well patronized. Ruffy declined several invitations to drink and passed on through the connecting door to the back room where the gambling tables were. It was still too early for the games to be going at full blast, but one poker game was in progress, and three or four men were standing idly about watching the game. Ruffy strolled over and joined them.

Jake, Lloyd Hafflin, Slim Johnson, and two others were sitting in the game. All appeared to be in a state of intoxication, but Ruffy shrewdly surmised that with the exception of Jake, the condition was more or less put on. The game had already reached a stage where chips played but a small part in the betting. They were being used for the ante, but for little else. The actual raising was being done with bills of large denominations.

A hand had just been dealt, and Jake started it off by tossing in a twenty dollar bill. The next player raised him by tossing in a hundred dollar bill. The others dropped out, and Jake pushed in another hundred, making a twenty dollar raise. The other player, whose name Ruffy did not know, called and won the pot. He separated the cash from the chips and started to put the two one hundred dollar bills in his pocket.

"No yuh don't," Jake snapped angrily, and reached over and grasped the man's wrist. "Yuh pikers don't get to sink no money in your jeans this trip. When this game breaks up there's only going to be one winner. Every dollar that shows on this table stays on top of it. There ain't nobody going to win a few hundred dollars and then quit like a piker."

"Oh, all right, if that's the way you feel about it," the man answered good-naturedly. "It's all right with me if it is with the rest."

"That's the rules then," Slim Johnson said quietly, and the others nodded assent.

Jake looked up as if for admiration and, for the first time, encountered Ruffy's steely gaze. For a moment he withstood the scrutiny and then glanced away. When his gaze came back it was challenging and sneering.

"What are you looking for, Mohannan —a little action on your fifty a month? If you are you'd better start a little game of your own. This ain't no penny ante affair." While Jake's tone was sneering it also carried a trace of alarm. "Or did Kitty ask you to come over here and put me to bed?"

"She asked me not to," Ruffy said

evenly. "Any time I put you tuh bed it'll be with a shovel; and Kitty knows it, whether you do or not. I'm lookin' for six months' back wages. Come across."

Jake was obviously relieved, but he kept to his attitude of truculence.

"I'm busy. Come around in the morning," he retorted with a drunken leer.

"No, right now," Ruffy snapped.

"Think I'll be broke in the morning, huh?"

"Yuh'll be broke in the morning if yuh pay up, but yuh'll be in a damned sight worse shape if yuh don't," Ruffy said evenly, and swept the circle of angry faces with a glance. His hand nestled around the handle of his gun, and both Jake and Johnson unobtrusively slid their hands beneath the table. It was a tense situation for a moment, but one glance at Ruffy's anger distorted visage caused the gamblers to feel that the cowboy was not bluffing. It was Hafflin, with less experience than the others, who broke the silence.

"See here, Mohannan, you can't come busting in here without being invited, and we sure as hell didn't invite you," he blustered. "Now get out before we throw you out!"

Ruffy smiled crookedly.

"Kitty did ask me tuh put yuh to bed," he said evenly. "Yuh just start something and see how quick I accommodate her."

The others had not moved and a sickly grin spread over Hafflin's face as he eased back into his chair. It was obvious that he felt he had been very close to the Great Divide. His relief was apparent when Ruffy turned his attention to Johnson.

"Git your hands on top of the table," Ruffy snarled angrily. "I'm in here tuh collect three hundred dollars for myself, or ten thousand for the girls, and I don't give a damn which it is, and if you fellows want the girl's money you'd better decide in my favor. You can't play cards with a dead man's cash."

"If you owe the man money, pay it to him," Slim Johnson advised nervously, and the others were profuse in their agreement.

Jake extracted a large package of bills from his inside pocket and pealed off three one hundred dollar bills and extended them to Ruffy.

"There's your damned money. Take it and get out," he said without looking up. He started to replace the money in his pocket, but the man who had won the last pot stopped him.

"That money's been in sight, so leave it on the table," he said, more to relieve the tension than anything else, perhaps. The others took it up.

"That's the rules," they chorused.

"All right; on the table she goes. I'm no piker," Jake said savagely and slapped the package of money down on the table beside his stack of chips. He started to put back in his pocket a long legal envelope that he had extracted with the money. He hesitated a moment and then called after Ruffy.

"Here, Mohannan, is some things that I was going to mail to Madge. Take it and drop it into the post office."

Ruffy returned and took the envelope without a word and backed out of the room. Once outside, he stopped and glanced at the address. It was a bulky envelope, but there was very little of anything in it. It was not well sealed, and he decided that he would borrow some paste and stick the flap more securely. He put it back into his pocket. Halfway to the post office he stopped dead still and pondered a wild idea that had popped into his head. Then he recollected himself and moved on.

A RESTAURANT adjoined the saloon, but, though he had not eaten since noon, Ruffy passed on. The next building was the post office. He remembered the letter which he was supposed to post, but it remained in his pocket. He glanced furtively about; no one was in sight. Satisfied that he was not being observed, he entered a narrow alley that extended between the two buildings and followed it back to where it intercepted the wider alley that ran along the back of the buildings. He explored back along this to the rear of the saloon, and ten minutes later emerged again onto the main street.

A number of saddle horses were standing tied to the hitch rack in front of the saloon, and Ruffy scrutinized them closely as he passed on his way to the hotel. He lingered here only a few minutes; then returned to the hitch rack for his horse.

A wild, half broke horse was standing next to his, and Ruffy untied him as well as his own. Then, mounting his own horse and leading the other, he headed towards the livery stable. At the end of the alley he stopped and tied the borrowed horse to a fence; he then went on to the stable. An old gun that had once been the property of old Jacob Frazier reposed in the war bag behind his saddle, and after a moment's deliberation he fished it out and thrust it into the front of his shirt. It was a different caliber than his own, but it was fully loaded, and Ruffy surmised that it might come in handy.

He wasted only enough time at the stable to see that his horse was properly tended to and returned to the end of the alley. The borrowed horse danced about wildly at his approach, but Ruffy did not attempt to mount. Instead, he led the horse down the alley to a point just behind the post office and tied him out of sight in an abandoned machine shed, but in such a manner that he could be instantly untied.

On his previous trip of exploration he had discovered a large piece of burlap, and with this and a few strings he managed to construct an all enveloping cloak. He pressed the dents out of his hat and pulled the brim down all the way around. Then, with a handkerchief tied about his face for a mask, he felt ready for business. A heavy, shot loaded quirt hanging from the saddle horn caught his attention and he appropriated that. It would make an excellent weapon at close quarters, and he had no desire to use a gun if it could be avoided.

A moment later he stood at the back door of the gambling den and cautiously tried the latch. It was unlocked. He shifted his gun to his left hand, and, grasping the quirt by the small end in the other, he cautiously opened the door and slipped inside.

For a moment his entrance was unobserved, and he had time to take in the scene before him. There were a few more men present than there had been on his previous visit, but there was still only one game in progress and all the men were grouped around the table. He was almost upon them before his presence was discovered.

A concerted gasp of amazement and alarm went up from the spectators as Ruffy swept the circle of faces with his gun. There was no need for him to order them to put up their hands, nor was there time. With one accord the bystanders fell back out of possible line of fire and elevated their hands, while the two gamblers who were seated with their backs toward him, and thus placed at a decided disadvantage, took their cue from the spectators and likewise raised their hands.

But Slim Johnson was facing him, and he was too old a head to be taken entirely by surprise. His hand darted like a striking snake to the gun in his lap. The room vibrated with the report of two shots coming simultaneously. Slim slumped against the table with a half articulate oath, and his gun clattered to the floor as Ruffy, untouched, came on.

But the fight was not over. Both Hafflin and Jake had gone for their guns and were just bringing them above the table as Slim collapsed, but they were a trifle too slow. At pointblank range Ruffy sent a bullet thudding into Hafflin's shoulder, and at almost the same instant crashed the heavy, shot loaded quirt down upon Jake's head.

Hafflin crashed over backward from the force of the bullet, and Jake slumped across the table unconscious. No one else had lowered his hands, and when someone from the other room attempted an entrance, another bullet from Ruffy's gun splintered the door within six inches of his head and he ducked back and slammed the door behind him.

Without a wasted motion Ruffy picked up Jake's packet of bills and what other money was neatly piled on the table, and still keeping the men and the connecting door covered, backed out the way he had come.

Just outside he stopped. For a full minute no one inside the building stirred, then there was a concerted rush for the rear entrance.

Ruffy sent two bullets crashing through the door at the height of a man's head, and the stampede stopped as suddenly as it had begun. He distinctly heard the men dropping to the floor out of the path of any more possible bullets, and knew that the next rush would be well considered. He turned and ran lightly down the alley, divesting himself of his burlap robe as he ran and remaking the dents in his hat. With a single motion he untied the half wild horse and sent his one remaining bullet scorching across its rump.

With a snort and a bound the horse thundered away down the alley. The sound of his departing would linger for several minutes, but the horse was gone. Ruffy did not know where the horse was headed, he did know that wherever it was he would be there before he was overtaken and recaptured.

THE horse had no sooner got under way than Ruffy ducked into the narrow alley that led to the main street beside the post office. By the time the men in the saloon had bethought themselves to leave the place by the front door and circle the building, he had entered the deserted post office lobby and was nonchalantly sticking down the flap of a large bulky envelope.

He dropped it into the mail box, and listened for a moment to the wild confusion that issued from the back alley; then sauntered across the street to the hotel. There was a momentary lull in the racket across the street, and the rapid drumming of flying hoofs came faintly on the still night air. That he was not alone in hearing it was evident a moment later by the crowd's mad scramble to get possession of the horses tied along the hitch racks. Startled by the wild confusion, a few of the horses broke loose, but were soon recaptured, and the wild mob raced away in pursuit of the runaway horse.

On his first trip of exploration through the alley, Ruffy had discovered a cat-hole under the post office floor and into this he had hurled the gun which he had used. There was little likelihood of its being found, and even so it would be impossible to connect it with him. No one knew that he possessed it. He had recently come upon it in the attic of the ranch-house when preparing for the sale and had appropriated it without mentioning the fact to any of the family. In his room he carefully went over his clothing and removed any telltale pieces of lint that might connect him with the burlap cloak. He knew that he would be the first man suspected, and that he would probably be arrested, but his own gun had not been fired and that would be something of an alibi. The quicker it happened the better it would be for him. He went out and across the street to the restaurant and ordered supper.

A crowd of excited men who had been unable to get possession of horses were gathered in front of the saloon, but Ruffy entered the restaurant unobserved. But no sooner had he ordered than the proprietor slipped out and in a few minutes returned with the town marshal, followed by half a dozen armed citizens.

The marshal made no attempt to hide his suspicions, nor did Ruffy make any demonstration of being surprised that he was suspected. The marshal was an officious little man, and Ruffy elected to take him as he had always done, lightly.

"Where have yuh been the last half hour?" the marshal demanded without preliminary.

"Over at the hotel mostly," Ruffy answered easily. "A few minutes ago I took my horse down to the livery stable, but went back to the hotel. Why?"

"I guess yuh know. Two men were pretty badly shot up over at the Elk Horn, and another one blackjacked, and the place was robbed," the marshal retorted.

"I heard about it," Ruffy smiled. "Think any of 'em will die?"

"They might at that," the marshal said grimly. "Lloyd Hafflin is in a bad way, and Slim Johnson ain't so well off; neither is Jake Frazier. The doctor says he may have a fractured skull."

"Pretty good evening's work for someone, wasn't it? Got any idea who it was? Any clues or anything?" Ruffy quizzed.

"Aside from the fact that the man's build and walk looked decidedly familiar to several men present, we've only one so far," the little marshal said, and stopped to give the announcement emphasis. "He went away and left the quirt with which he brained young Frazier lying on the table. And it's been identified as belonging to you."

"Must have been an old one," Ruffy laughed. "I haven't owned one for five years and only carried that one a week."

"Can yuh prove that?" the marshal demanded.

"By every cowpuncher on the range," Ruffy answered easily. "Kinda thought that in view of what happened this evening that I'd be suspected, and I reckon the fellow that pulled the job figured the same way, but you're gittin' a little previous with your manufactured evidence.

They tell me that the hombre that yuh want left town like he'd been sent for, and ain't got back."

The officious little officer was taken aback, but it was hard to make him acknowledge that he had taken the wrong track. And in spite of the fact that the consensus of opinion was that the holdup had escaped on horseback, there had been men present who were more or less certain that they had recognized Ruffy's peculiar stride, as the holdup had entered and left the saloon, and it was upon this that the marshal was basing his conclusions.

"Mind lettin' me see that shootin' iron you're packin'?" he asked, but it was plain that he was beginning to doubt the accuracy of his hastily formed conclusions.

"Not in the least," Ruffy answered pleasantly. "Look at it all yuh want. Look down the barrel and blow your fool head off for all I care." He extended the gun butt first and smiled while the officer squinted down the barrel and sniffed for any lingering smell of burnt powder.

"I guess you're all right," he said a little reluctantly. "This gun ain't been cleaned since gosh knows when, but she ain't been fired today, that's a cinch." He started to hand it back, but Ruffy stopped him.

"Let the others smell of it," he said. "I hadn't thought of it, but since yuh brought the subject up, it might be a good idea tuh have a lot of witnesses."

The gun passed from hand to hand, and each man nodded his agreement that the gun had not been fired. A minute later, seemingly satisfied, the men took their departure, but not before Ruffy had been subjected to a thorough search of his person. The three hundred dollars which he had collected from Jake, and a few dollars in silver, were all that he possessed.

So far, everything had gone well, but he was still far from easy in his mind. Once the runaway horse had been apprehended it would become apparent that a hoax had been perpetrated, and that the holdup had remained in town. The finger of suspicion would again point in his direction, and the temper of the crowd that had gone in pursuit would be far different from the one that had remained in town.

It was the denizens of the town that had made the wild scramble to get in pursuit of the supposedly fleeing bandit, and no regard had been paid to the ownership of the horses which they had mounted. That alone had prevented the horse in question from being missed. He wished earnestly that some of the rampageous townspeople who had commandeered horses and gone in pursuit would be bucked off. He felt that a few riderless horses picked up later, and a number of men walking back to town, would go a long way towards destroying the one remaining bit of evidence against him. But that was hardly to be hoped for. The pursuers had got out of town without casualties, and once started to run the horses were unlikely to stop and buck.

ON HIS way back to the hotel he passed a group of men who, judging from the way the conversation died out at his approach, were discussing the holdup. Most of them affected not to notice him, but two cowboys turned their backs to the crowd and favored him with sly, triumphant grins. It was ample evidence that even his friends considered him guilty. But their triumphant grins indicated that they thought he had got away with it, and Ruffy had recognized them among the bystanders at the game. They would know whether or not positive identification would be possible and their expressions were decidedly optimistic.

At the hotel entrance he encountered Kitty and Bill Leeds. They had just returned from the office of the local doctor, where they had gone to ascertain the condition of the wounded men. Bill looked gloomy and anxious, but Kitty seemed in better spirits, and more hopeful than she had been.

"How are the casualties?" Ruffy asked with an air of utter indifference.

"They're not so bad off," Kitty replied more light heartedly than Ruffy would have expected. "Jake has a large bump on his head, but he's sober, and that's something. Hafflin is the worst off, but the doctor says he won't die."

"Too bad about the money, though," Ruffy said for the benefit of a few passers-by who had stopped to listen. "I reckon it's gone for good now."

"No more than it was before," Kitty said wearily. "Maybe they'll catch the robber and we'll get it back. And that blow on the head seems to have brought Jake back to his senses. It's the first time he was ever robbed, and I believe it's making him realize something of how we feel when he robs us. Anyway he's terribly repentant. And," she added frankly embarrassed, "it might have been worse. Until Bill told me that the holdup was known to have left town and that you were still here, I thought sure it was you that had held them up. Of course," she hastened to explain, "I knew that if you did do it, it was only to get our money for us."

"I reckon yuh wasn't alone in that," Ruffy laughed. "A lot of other people seem tuh be laborin' along under the same delusion. But you're creditin' me with a lot more generosity and nerve than I've got."

A moment later Kitty excused herself and went to her room. Bill took Ruffy by the arm and led him on down the street.

"What in hell did yuh do with the money?" Bill demanded as soon as they were beyond hearing distance of the curious listeners. "They searched you and they searched your room and Kitty's. What did yuh do with it, eat it?"

"Mailed it tuh Madge." Ruffy made no attempt at denial. "Jake gave me a package addressed to her, and that's what first gave me the idea."

"Pretty clever," Bill commented. "But do yuh know whose quirt it was that yuh brained young Jake with and left lyin' on the table?"

"No. Why?"

"It was mine."

"The hell it was!" Ruffy ejaculated, startled. "Can anyone identify it?"

"Not much chance," Bill replied. "And it wouldn't make any difference if they did. I was in the saloon when the commotion broke loose, but I'm in the clear. The only thing that makes me sore is that yuh didn't take me in with yuh instead of that other fellow. Who was he?"

"No one, Bill, I pulled the job alone."

"Then who was it that left town? I heard someone goin' down the alley like the clatter wheels of hell not a minute after the shootin' stopped."

"That's the thing, if any, that's goin' tuh land the job onto me, and if it was your quirt that I left lying on the table, then it must have been your horse that went down the street. I wanted something tuh lead the chase out of town so I'd have time tuh mail the money, and he seemed more likely tuh run and keep a-runnin' than any other horse in sight. So I took him. He started out well. I only hope he keeps it up. If they overtake him, my goose is cooked."

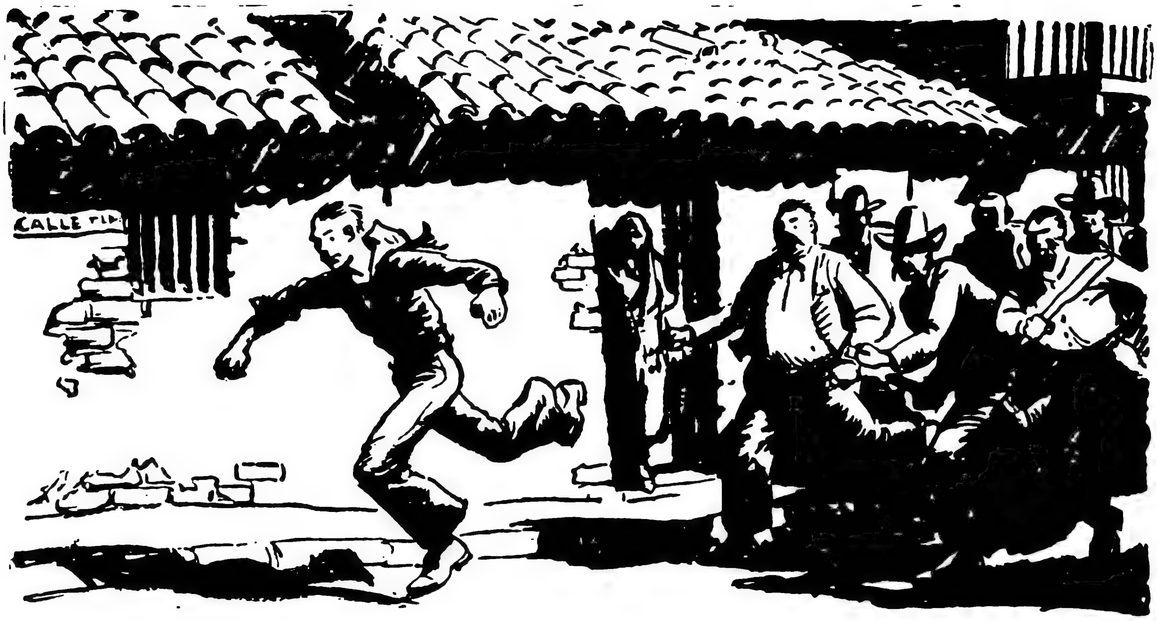
"They won't. But I reckon yuh'd better git back and mingle with the crowd. Come out to my place in the morning, and if I ain't there wait till I come. It's twelve miles tuh the ranch, and twice that far tuh where that bronc'll stop. It's farther than I've ever walked in my life, but I'm on my way."

"Yuh mean that you're goin' tuh walk tuh the ranch tonight?" Ruffy asked in amazement. "Why don't yuh take my horse and send someone back after me in the morning?"

"Because if that horse is found, it'll look a lot better if I'm out there afoot. I'll tell 'em that I left town on him, and got bucked off out on the flat. And if any member of that posse thinks that horse can't buck, I'll sure invite 'em tuh try him out. I'd have been home long ago, only I got such a shakin' up comin' in that I've been afraid tuh start. I've just been waitin' for yuh tuh git ready tuh go so I could make yuh ride him."

"It's twelve miles. Yuh can't make it," Ruffy protested with all of a cowboy's horror of walking.

"Maybe not, but I'll still be tryin' if anybody comes along. Now yuh go back and git Kitty away on the first train. Make her beat that letter so Madge won't give the game away. Don't be afraid tuh tell her. The worst shock she experienced today was when I convinced her that yuh didn't have anything tuh do with the holdup."



A Yarn of the Navy and the Bond of—

SHIPMATES

By ERNEST PAYNTER

HIS fellow bluejackets on the scout cruiser *Ashland* called Mence by many names other than that with which he was born. Most of them names, and qualified by adjectives, forbidden to polite society. But the one that finally stuck was handed forth by Lieutenant Chester under the impulse of a raging sense of just what a malignant, inventive minded messenger could do when he really put his mind to it.

For a week now while en route to Panama the huge armada had been engaged in fleet maneuvers. Home squadron and enemy squadron search problem. Day and night battle practice. Every drill imaginable had been perpetrated upon the many ships by the new commander in chief. Officers and men were worn ragged by lack of sleep and constant tension.

But finally the entire fleet had swung into a long, gray line, the intervals of which were spaced as if by a gauge. And Neptune help the vessel that varied from her proper distance or swerved from the column! A flutter of multicolored bunting or a flare of lights at the yard of the four starred flagship announced that the miscreant had been detected. Frequently followed by a caustic, but regulation phrased, message from the admiral himself.

On the bridge of the *Ashland* Lieutenant Chester, watch officer, rubbed his eyes and shook himself in an effort to banish desire for sleep. Last night had been a busy one with but little rest. Likewise the whole of this day. A few minutes in his bunk after dinner, and then the eight-to-twelve on the bridge. Well, thank heaven, it was almost midnight, when he would be good for eight hours of peace.

The *Ashland* was doing beautiful, making just the proper number of propeller revolutions to keep her in position. The dim binnacle light, the rhythmically intoned "port bridge—bright light" of the lookout, the muffled strokes of the ship's bell, all were conducive to sleep; and Chester sighed longingly as he thought of the bunk from which, except for a remarkably brief period, he had been absent almost thirty-six hours. His tanned face lighted with enthusiasm as his relief swung up the ladder and strode across to the port side of the bridge.

"How's everything, Joe?" asked the new arrival.

"Shipshape—except I'm that dog-tired. Course: west—southwest. Standard speed, twelve knots. Watch on deck, and — quartermaster, get that signal from the flagship!" Chester commanded, as a sudden string of lights began to flicker from the leading vessel. *Dot—dash—dash—dot dash* . . . With almost lightning rapidity the flashes flared and died.

"Not for us, sir," called the quartermaster. "It's the *Dayton*. Out of position. Orders for the watch officer to report on the flagship for instructions tomorrow morning when we anchor in Panama."

"Very well, Chester, I'll relieve you," finally announced the relief. "By the way, where and who is the messenger?"

"It's that young hellion, Mence. I suppose he's stowed away some place sleeping. Messenger, messenger! Quartermaster, where is that messenger?"

"He was here just a minute ago, sir," replied the petty officer, hastening to the head of the ladder and peering downward. "There he is, standing over the fire room hatch. Mence, you infernal pelican, come up here where you're supposed to stand your watch."

"What are you doing down there?" demanded Chester as the cherub faced, olive skinned boy climbed casually to the bridge. "What's that you're hiding in your hand, a cigaret?" he added.

"Yes, sir. You see someone had thrown a lighted stub down on the open hatch and I was afraid it might fall through the gratings and set something on fire below. So I went down to get it," replied the messenger, his trustful blue eyes innocently meeting those of the officer.

"Getting mighty conscientious all at once," grunted the lieutenant, not in the least fooled by this unusual exhibition of sense of duty. "Well, you remain here on the bridge. This is your station. And throw the cigaret over the side," he directed as he swung downward and to his room.

Hastily undressing, he switched off the light and turned in. Almost instantly he was submerged in sleep a thousand fathoms deep, a sleep so profound that it required at least two minutes of violent shaking before he realized that Mence was standing alongside of his bunk and almost shouting his name.

"What is it?" demanded Chester, still half asleep.

"Captain wants you on the bridge immediately, sir."

"What's the trouble?"

"Don't know, sir. He acted like he was ready to bite a piece out of the foremast. He said 'immediately'."

"Oh, tell him to go and soak his head in the ocean," growled the scarcely aroused officer, simultaneously switching on his bunk light and sitting up as a sign that he understood.

"Very well, sir," replied the boy, sauntering out with a covert glance for any stray cigarets or sandwiches.

Any well meaning messenger, one not entirely obsessed by diabolical intent, would have informed the commanding officer that Lieutenant Chester was dressing and would report on the bridge immediately. But Mence was rankling under the memory of having been compelled to throw away that half smoked cigaret which, as is the understood and proper prerogative of all well conducted messengers, he had appropriated from the supply of a watch officer. Moreover, the Navy discipline, applied by Lieutenant Chester, who was also the rookie's division officer, irked Mence. He regarded it as a personal matter.

When Chester arrived on the bridge three minutes later, he became immediately aware that something was wrong. A subdued tension permeated the air. The watch officer, binoculars in hand, was striding back and forth in a supermilitary manner. The quartermaster was standing directly behind the helmsman who was gazing fixedly at the compass, his hands holding the steering wheel as if glued to it. The bridge lookouts were statuelike in their alertness. Even the messenger, with a frightened look on his usually placid face, was at a rigid attention instead of lolling half asleep in some obscure corner.

At the head of the ladder stood the commanding officer, Crusty Nethers, his long, thin face indignant, his eyes glittering with righteous wrath.

"Did you wish to see me, sir?" asked Chester, wondering what it was all about.

"Yes, sir, I did. *Very* much!" barked

Nethers. "Messenger! Repeat what Lieutenant Chester told you in answer to my order."

"He—he— Well, sir—he——"

"Repeat it exactly as you delivered it to me a minute ago," ordered the captain sternly. "Exactly. Without variation."

"He said—he said—" gulped the frightened boy, "to tell you to go and soak your head in the ocean."

"Is that correct, Mister Chester?" demanded the commanding officer, his gray mustache bristling indignantly.

"Yes, sir, but I didn't mean——"

"For me to do it unless I wished to?"

"No, sir, but the messenger, should have understood——"

"The first duty of a messenger, sir, is to deliver a message exactly as received. I believe that is correct—unless you have changed the regulations recently," he informed the harried Chester sarcastically.

"No, sir, but——"

"That will do, Mister Chester. I sent for you to sign your rough log sheet, something you neglected to do before going off watch, a gross dereliction of duty. But your message to me, sir, was insubordination, rank insubordination, such as I will not tolerate on my ship. Sign your log and then go to your room and remain there three days."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Too bad, Joe," consoled one of Chester's fellow officers later in the day as he glanced in upon the victim of the overprecise Mence.

"Any messenger that had half as much sense as that goat we've got for a mascot would have understood that I didn't want my message delivered as I sent it. It was pure damn meanness on his part," growled the lieutenant disconsolately, thinking of the damage this incident would do to his record. "Mence! Mence, hell! 'Menace' it ought to be." And, recalling the delicate olive tinge to the boy's skin, he added with a half grin, "He's 'the Yellow Menace' itself."

THUS the name originated and when Lieutenant Chester, having finished his penance, returned to duty, he found that from fo'c's'le to quarterdeck the messenger was hailed as the Yellow Menace. And, while the boy gloried in the title, he manifested that it marked the beginning of a feud between himself and his division officer.

Chester felt somewhat the same way, but was restrained from action by a sense of noblesse oblige. When one is six feet tall, a crack athlete and, in addition, a commissioned officer, it is manifestly impossible to obtain physical satisfaction from a seventeen year old enlisted man who is barely five foot four and weighs a hundred and fifteen.

In an effort to be fair Chester leaned backward in his attitude toward the diminutive messenger. Realizing that the marring of his hitherto unblemished record was due to Mence, he feared that he might become unfair toward the boy. And the Yellow Menace, as if realizing his advantage, played it to the utmost. Almost late at inspection, very close to slack in his appearance when on duty, verging on insolent in manner, messages delivered in a slightly ambiguous verbiage . . . .

The lieutenant was tempted to have him relieved of duty as messenger and transferred to another division, but this would have been acknowledging defeat, and he refrained. Moreover, he sensed that there was something to the boy. It had required more than mere bravado to deliver that message to Captain Nethers. Also, Chester admired, rather disgustedly, the cleverness with which Mence approached the danger line of insubordination, but managed to evade actually touching it.

On the day after the completion of his period of punishment, and three days after the fleet had anchored in Panama, Chester stood at the head of the gangway and, as officer of the deck, inspected the liberty party as it filed down into the waiting boats. Spic and span, in spotless blue regulation uniforms, with white hats, he felt satisfied that even the admiral himself could have found no fault with the appearance of the *Ashland's* men. He swept Mence from head to foot as he hurried to the gangway. For shoregoing, Chester had to admit that the messenger looked perfect; just a little too perfect.

"Isn't that a shore tailor-made uniform?" queried the officer.

"Yes, sir."

"Thought so. If you had been paying attention at quarters this morning you would have remembered what the admiral said in his fleet general order about tailor-made clothes; that they must follow the

'Uniform Book.' Your collar's too narrow, tape too wide, stars too small and fancy. You may go ashore this time, but I want you to report at nine o'clock muster tomorrow morning in paymaster's regulation clothes. Also, don't forget that it's to be commanding officer's preliminary for admiral's inspection. Get in the boat."

"Aye, aye, sir. And thank you, sir," Mence added, much to the officer of the deck's surprise.

The following morning Chester was delayed in conference with the executive until assembly had sounded. Hastily buckling on his sword, he hurried forward, barely arriving as his senior petty officer finished roll call and announced, "All hands present or accounted for." Having reported his division, he again strode aft and took charge.

"Division, attention! Open ranks, march! Outboard rank, about face! Take your dress from aft," he ordered.

As the men formed for inspection he stepped to the head of the two columns and surveyed them carefully. Halfway down the line he noted Mence, conspicuous in a rig that shamed the entire division. Every item of his uniform was strictly regulation, spotlessly clean. But the ensemble was such as to make of him a nightmare.

"Mence" snapped Chester. "Where did you get those clothes?"

"Paymaster, sir."

"When?"

"Five months ago, when I enlisted."

The division officer realized that the statement was probably true. In the rush of outfitting recruits at training stations, uniforms that do not fit are frequently issued, but with strict orders that such shall be returned for exchange or modification by the ship's tailor. He further realized that Mence had been too careless to do this, and was now endeavoring to make the entire division ridiculous. The white hat was too small; instead of being round it stuck out with angular effects. The blouse hung like an unshapely bag; the trousers were too long. The shoes were too large, the perfect shine only making them appear larger.

"Why didn't you take them to the tailor for alteration?" demanded the division officer.

"I did, sir, this morning. But he didn't have time to fix me up. Said he was too busy sewing gold braid on a coat for you."

Chester glanced hurriedly aft. The commanding officer was methodically inspecting the fourth division. His arrival was a matter of minutes. No time to permit the culprit to shift into respectable looking, even if tailor-made, uniform. But he didn't want the entire division, himself included, to get in wrong on account of one man.

"Mence," he directed, "fall out. Go below and keep out of sight until after inspection's finished."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Stepping from the ranks, the boy started to obey. Only, instead of going forward, thereby avoiding the vigilance of Captain Nethers, he walked aft, a grotesque figure at which the commanding officer gazed in stern disapproval.

"Where are you going?" demanded the captain.

"Below, sir," Mence answered saluting snappily.

"What for?"

"My division officer told me to fall out and stay away until you had finished inspection."

"I see. Rather clever—when it works. Mister Chester!"

"Yes, sir," answered the lieutenant, gritting his teeth at the deliberate betrayal.

"Did you endeavor to have this man avoid my inspection?"

"I didn't want——"

"Answer my question, please."

"Yes, sir, I did. I thought——"

"Very well. I shall not inspect your division now. Have them fall in at three o'clock this afternoon. All of them, please."

Eyes straight ahead, the captain strode between the open ranks to the next division.

Saturday afternoon! The sailorman's half holiday since the days of Paul Jones. All spoiled by one man.

Chester saw the hands of his men clench in anger and their eyes begin to glitter menacingly. All he himself had to do was remain aloof, and this crowd would handle the Yellow Menace. But, in the present instance, as in the delivery of that ill omened message, the boy had been obeying orders. With malice aforethought, unquestionably. And yet, the fault was, by a very narrow construction, partly his own.

"Mence," he called quietly, "have you any other regulation uniforms?"

"Yes, sir."

"That have been overhauled by the ship's tailor?"

"Yes, sir. Two of them."

"Why didn't you wear one of them?"

"I thought this one was pretty good."

"I see. Inspection is at three o'clock this afternoon. At one o'clock I want you to report to me for a preliminary bag inspection."

"Very well, sir," muttered Mence, leaning against the bulkhead.

"Stand to attention!" snapped Chester. "Pull your hat down! Wipe that grin off your face! Put your hands to your sides! . . . Division, attention! Through a mistake of mine in estimating a man, the division loses its liberty this afternoon. I'm sorry, but I will try to make it up sometime . . . Bos'n's Mate, have Mence lay his bag out now for your inspection. Keep him on the topside with it until messgear goes. Then have him stow it away and break it out again at one o'clock. And, Bos'n's Mate," Chester called the petty officer aside and added in a low voice, "I don't want you people to take this out on Mence. I'll handle it . . . Division, dismissed!"

THE immaculate appearance of the division, together with the wobegone faces of the men in it, appealed even to the strict Captain Nethers, and he gave instructions that immediately after inspection the usual liberty should be granted. Only, to add to the sense of indignity, he called the Yellow Menace from the ranks and exhibited him as an example of what a well dressed gob wears.

"Now here is a man in strictly regulation uniform," he announced. "It merely shows what a bluejacket who is careful of his appearance, and wishes to, may do without resorting to shore tailors. Mister Chester, I wish you would have your entire division pattern after this boy," said the captain, managing to conceal the slight twinkle in his ordinarily impassive eyes.

The lieutenant restrained the impulse to inform the commanding officer that if his entire division were cast in the same mold as that young devil he himself would jump overboard. Instead he saluted methodically, gave a half hearted "Aye, aye, sir" to the skipper, and a look of disgust at the Menace. Then, having dismissed the men, he hastened below and shifted for going ashore.

As he arrived at the gangway he noticed the messenger leaning disconsolately on the rail, gazing wistfully at the liberty party as it hurried down into the boat.

"Aren't you going ashore, Mence?" he asked.

"No, sir," responded the boy reluctantly.

"Your name's on the list, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. But I changed my mind about going."

Chester gazed at his Nemesis closely. Never before had Mence passed up an opportunity to hit the beach in a foreign port. Then he recalled the clenched hands of his division when their liberty had been restrained.

"Did any of the men promise to beat you up if they caught you on shore?" he queried.

"No, sir," muttered the boy, after an instant's hesitation.

"Maybe none of them said it, but I'll bet they hinted at it," declared the officer with a touch of admiration for the refusal to become a "white mouse." "Got your liberty check?" he continued.

"Yes, sir."

"Get down in the boat. I'll have a talk with the division when we hit the landing."

As the launch hauled alongside of the float and the men disembarked, Chester called the party to attention.

"We had some trouble on the *Ashland* today," he informed them. "But I want it forgotten. If I hear of anything happening to Mence, I'll hold a careful investigation, and will see that the man or men responsible wish they had never come ashore. Just remember that we were all rookies once and steered a pretty bum course for a while; but we're shipmates now. That's all."

Shortly before midnight Chester climbed into a taxi and headed back toward the landing. As the machine swung through the unlighted portion of the town, from which the American bluejackets were restricted, he suddenly became aware of a commotion on a side street. Ragged people were hurrying from doorways; from a similar group, which was milling about, came shrill cries of anger. Abruptly, from the center of the crowd, broke a small figure—Mence. His uniform was mud spattered and torn, white hat gone, one leg of his trousers entirely missing. As the boy shot down the street, the crowd close behind, Chester leaped from the car.

"Here, Mence, this way!" he shouted.

The man-o'-war's man, hearing the call, increased his speed and had almost reached the officer when he stumbled and fell. As he went down, one of the pursuers leaped forward and raised a glittering knife. Chester reached down, seized a cobblestone and, with the accuracy that had made him the Academy's crack pitcher, let drive. The missile caught the assailant full in the chest, and, as he halted and half fell, the lieutenant again darted forward, seized Mence by the arm and raced toward the car, the engine of which was still running.

"Down to the Navy landing," he directed the driver, climbing in and hauling the boy after him.

"What were you doing in that section, Mence? Don't you know it's out of bounds?" he demanded as the car sped into a lighted street.

"I got lonesome. None of the division would knock around with me, so I went down there alone. No one ever told me that I wasn't allowed to, sir," declared the messenger innocently as he endeavored to arrange his disrupted uniform.

"Bunk! Told you—no. But it's been posted on the bulletin board since we anchored."

"I had as much right down there as—as anyone else."

"That's none of your business. Understand!"

"I was just passing through on my way to the ship."

"You know the orders. You're supposed to take either a taxi or a street car through that section."

"I was broke."

"If you were as good at sailorizing as you are at making excuses, you'd be an admiral in a month."

"Are you going to report me, sir?"

"Certainly. It's time you learned that orders are issued to be obeyed, not merely to use up paper."

Mence grunted disdainfully. He realized that this probably meant a court-martial. And, he believed, this was another episode in the personal battle between himself and his division officer.

"What have you got it in for me for, Mister Chester?" he finally queried.

But the lieutenant gazed straight ahead, giving no sign of having heard the question, at which the boy nodded his head sagely.

"You stay around here close," directed Chester as the machine stopped at the Navy landing. "Our boat's due in fifteen minutes," he added, strolling over to a group of officers from the various vessels, and remaining there until the dock patrol officer megaphoned:

"*Ashland's* boat alongside."

"Where's Mence?" he asked of the half dozen bluejackets from his own ship as he walked over and gazed anxiously about.

"Don't know, sir. We got here about ten minutes ago. He wasn't around then," replied a petty officer.

"I told that infernal brat not to leave the dock . . . Oh, Wilson," Chester called to the patrol officer, "have you seen anything of a half-portion sized young devil around here. He's in rags, and will have a revolution started before morning if we don't find him."

"I haven't . . . What's that?" the patrol officer barked as a bedraggled native darted to his side and began to chatter volubly. "Take it easy. *Uno momento,* hombre. Now! *¿Qui esto?*"

"*Uno leetle muchacho*. He come eento my boat while I am asleep. He cut the rope. When I am awake he heet me here. See," the native said and pointed to a knot on his forehead.

"It sounds like the Yellow Menace," snarled Chester as the dripping man, wringing his hands, continued his tale of woe.

"He heet me here. I theenk he ees *mucho infirmo* een the head, an' I joomp een the ocean. Then, Sancta Maria, he take my boat an' ees gone there." The native waved his hands vaguely toward the bay. "An' he make thees for me," he said placing his thumb to his nose and wriggling his fingers.

"Damn!" barked the patrol officer. "Do you know who this troublemaker is, Chester?"

"There's only one man in the fleet who could raise so much hell in twenty-four hours. Sure, he's in my division. I'll take the liberty party off to the *Ashland*. Get a boat and go looking for him. The tide's coming in now, but when it starts setting out it tears through that narrow channel like a mill race. If that boat ever gets out to sea, the fleet will have a search problem that will make 'home and enemy squadron' practice seem like 'button, button, who's got the button?' . . . Here, you," Chester called to the frantic native. "Here's twenty dollars. Is that enough for your boat? Sorry about this affair, *amigo*, and I'll see that the man who did it gets his . . . All *Ashland's* party get in the launch!"

"Can you get a volunteer crew?" asked Captain Nethers as Chester, having arrived on board hurriedly, explained the situation.

"Already have one, sir. Made it up from the liberty party as we were returning. Thompson will go cox'n. I have a bowman and a sternman and an engineer. That's all I need. I'll take a couple of rifles for signaling. I feel that it's up to me to take charge. I'm his division officer, and I suppose what I said scared him half to death for fear of a court-martial."

"He deserves one, all right, but if the admiral doesn't get too strenuous I have an idea that a few days bread and water will do him more good than a court. He'll remember it longer. Well, good luck, and if you're not back by daylight I'll get a fleet searching party to scour the whole bay and coast."

"Aye, aye, sir." And hastening from the cabin, Chester hurried down into the waiting boat, which immediately swung away from the gangway.

"Where will we head for, sir?" called the coxwain, barely distinguishable in the darkened cockpit.

"Get out into the middle of the bay," directed Chester, clinging to the canopy frame. "Then we'll stop the engines and drift with the tide for a few minutes so we can get the set of the current. Mence won't be able to row very long, so he'll be drifting, too. But with these dozens of small islands scattered about the bay, the Lord knows we may never locate him."

HAVING determined the set of the incoming tide, the party began their search. Even with the aid of the full moon it was difficult to distinguish anything definitely until almost on top of it. A dozen times the bowman's shouted "Boat on the port side!" caused the launch to change course and hasten to what, in each case, proved to be a floating log. Back into dim inlets, where overhanging tropical foliage shut out all light, the launch crept. Occasionally a guttural grunt, followed by a loud splash, broke the silence.

"Alligators," explained Chester. "These bayous are full of them. Lord help the boat that springs a leak here! Swing around and head back, cox'n. The tide will begin to ebb in another hour, and I want to be near the channel entrance when it starts."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Stop your engines," presently called Chester, climbing to the gunnel, rifle in hand. "Now listen closely, everybody. He might hear these and give an answering yell." He pointed the gun seaward and fired six rapid shots.

"Hear anything?" he asked.

"Not a thing," replied the crew.

"Head her on down the bay, cox'n," directed the officer. "We've still got a couple of miles to— Lord, look at that!"

A phosphorescent streak had darted past the launch, swung around and raced back. In the semidarkness a triangular fin could be seen protruding a few inches above the surface of the water.

"Golly, what a shark!" gasped the sternman.

At least fifteen feet long, the monster lay almost motionless, and its saucerlike eyes glistened balefully as it apparently gazed up at the boat.

"He's looking for breakfast," laughed the bowman nervously, and Chester, recalling tales of the ferocity of these tropical sea tigers, felt a shudder of repulsion.

"Cox'n," he called, "go ahead slowly. And have the bowman get an oar and take soundings continuously. We don't want to hit a submerged reef out here and stove a hole in our bottom. There's a lot of things I'd rather do than keep a shark out of the bread line."

With engines barely moving, the launch crept ahead. The bowman, lying flat on the fo'c's'le, and with a twelve foot oar in hand, thrust his impromptu depth finder downward and reported his soundings.

"No bottom. No bottom. No bottom," he called monotonously. "No bottom. No bot— Back her, back her!" he shouted suddenly as the boat abruptly slid into a shelving bank of sand, hesitated a second, and then began listing to port.

"All hands to the starboard side," called Chester easily, and, as the order was obeyed, the small craft came back to an even keel. "Full speed astern, cox'n," he directed, watching closely as the water boiled up under the flailing propeller.

"Stop her," he finally ordered.

Despite the power of the engine the launch remained fast. And slowly her bow was sinking into the sand. Shortly, as the tide began to ebb, the difficulty of getting clear would increase.

"How much water for'd?" Chester called.

"About two feet, sir," replied the bowman.

"How much back there?" he queried of the sternman.

"About five feet, sir," replied the boy aft, after shoving an oar downward. "And them sharks are still with us and lookin' mighty hungry. See!" He pointed over the side where, scarcely five feet away and barely submerged, the two scavengers lay, peering malevolently at their prospective victims.

"We've got to get out of this," declared Chester. "When the tide starts racing out it might capsize us . . . Baker, go for'd with your oar. Now you and the bowman find good holding ground and when I give the word push for all you're worth. Stand by for 'full astern' on your engines, Mischke. All ready? One—two—three. Go!"

The two men on the bow pushed and strained; the water aft was churned into a milk white cataract; the launch remained fast. The sharks, with a slight flip of their tails, moved off a few feet, but their murky eyes remained fixed on the boat.

"Only one thing left," observed Chester, removing his coat and trousers. "I'll get out and push. You men on the bow shove while the engine goes 'astern.'"

"Want me to get out with you?" asked the coxswain.

"No. You stay at the wheel. If the launch breaks ground suddenly, one man in the water's enough. I can hang onto the bow, but two men would be in each other's way."

"How about them sharks?"

"They won't come to where there's only two feet of water. All right, everybody stand by for quick work." The lieutenant having stripped to his underclothes, walked to the bow, lowered himself easily over the side and leaned against the boat.

"All hands stand by," he called. "One—two—three. Go!"

His shoulders bunched in huge knots, his toes dug into the sand; the breath of the men in the bow came in mighty gasps; and the water astern raged as if beaten by giant hands.

"Come—on—now, boys," gritted Chester through clenched teeth. "Again so—again so. Now, once more. All together. She's—there she goes!" And the launch shot suddenly astern.

"Look out!" he heard the coxswain scream. A lightning glance to one side showed him the two sharks tearing toward him as the boat reached deeper water. Gripping both hands about the narrow beading he threw his legs upward as one of the beasts turned on its back and, mouth wide, shot past, its mate a scant few feet astern. Then he felt strong arms about his shoulders, a quick jerk, and he was lying on the fo'c's'le.

"Thanks, Baker. That was nice work. I won't forget it," he declared, struggling to his feet and leaning unsteadily against the canopy.

"Let's give another signal for the Yellow Menace," he called as the launch drew close to Dead Man's Island, a small, low lying piece of ground near the entrance. At high tide it was entirely submerged. Tradition said that it had been used by Morgan, the buccaneer, as a hiding place for his chests of Spanish gold. Also, that he made it a practice to bury one of his crew with each lot of loot. Certainly the place was anathema to the natives.

"Stop the engines. Quiet, now," he directed as he again fired seaward.

"Anybody hear— Listen, what's that?" Chester cupped his ear and leaned forward. "I thought I heard— There it is again." A faint, wavering cry came from the direction of the island. "Head her over to port, cox'n," he directed. "Take it easy. Don't want to go on the rocks again. I see we still have our two hungry friends with us." The lieutenant pointed to the sharks which were following close astern.

"What do you get?" he called presently to the bowman.

"About five feet, sir."

"Stop her. We can't afford to go much closer. Keep quiet, everybody . . . Mence, Mence!" he shouted.

"Here I am. Hallo! Hallo! Don't

leave me!" screamed a frightened voice, and the Menace tore down to the water's edge.

"Where's that boat you stole?" called Chester.

"Gone, sir. I got out here and left it on the sand. The tide carried it away."

"That fixes things just right," snarled the officer. "If there's anything else that young heathen can do tonight I'd like to know what it is. Cox'n, ease her in until we just touch bottom."

CAUTIOUSLY the launch nosed her way shoreward, the bowman taking soundings constantly. Finally the craft touched the beach and came to an easy stop, fifty feet from where, shivering with cold and fright, stood Mence.

"Can you wade or swim out here? There's only about three feet of water," called Chester.

"I'm afraid, sir. I got out here because the boat was leaking, and there was a bunch of sharks all around me."

"If they had sense enough to know when they were well off they'd have laid off of you," growled the lieutenant.

The tide was still flooding; soon the island would be covered. Chester realized that he must get the boy. Harum-scarum, without sense of duty or discipline, he might be, but he was a fellow being; above all, a shipmate.

"Can't you try to swim it, Mence?" he again called.

"I'm afraid to try, sir. I— Look at that!" One of the sharks had risen lazily to the surface, submerging as Chester took rapid aim and fired. "You won't leave me here, will you?" he begged.

"Certainly not! Ought to, at that . . . Cox'n, open up your emergency ration box. Those blasted sharks want something to eat, and if you can keep 'em entertained on the starboard side, I'll swim for it on the port."

The contents of the box were hurriedly brought forth.

"One can of hardtack, twelve of canned Willie and eight bars of chocolate." The lieutenant enumerated the provender. "Guess the chocolate's your private stock, eh? . . . Thought so. Well, I'll say one thing: Those infernal beasts are going to think that the Waldorf Astoria has opened up a branch here for them personally.

"If they've got any sense at all they'll let me alone and go after some good eating. Now, just as soon as I get undressed again, you start throwing that grub overboard to them. For the love of Mike, keep it going. I don't want to get their appetites aroused and then disappoint them. Suppose you drop a piece of that canned Bill in now and see what our little playmates think of it. Nice sharkies," Chester said, as the two beasts darted around the stern and began struggling for the food which the coxswain was slowly rationing to them.

"Feed it to 'em in courses, Thompson," he called as he poised on the gunnel. "This is one time I'm perfectly willing to be overlooked at mealtime. Keep it up, boy, keep it up." And with scarcely a ripple he lowered himself into the water and half a minute later stood alongside the anxiously waiting messenger.

"It's awfully nice of you to do this for me," chattered the boy.

"Think so? You ought to be out there taking the place of that canned Bill. Now we've got to get back to that launch. Can you make it? You might as well say yes, because if you say no, I'm going to knock you for a home run and drag you on board by the neck. Get me? How about it?"

"I feel better now that you're here with me," half grinned the Menace.

"All right. Undress. We've got to make speed when we start . . . Oh, Thompson," Chester called to the coxswain. "How are your boarders?"

"Just got three more, and see another bunch headed this way. Better hurry, I've got just four cans of Willie left before I start on the dessert."

"Any on this side?" he called to the bowman.

"All clear, sir."

"Fine! Now, Mence, walk out as far as you can. And don't splash unless you want to do the Jonah stunt without any return engagement. You, bowman and sternman, stand by to haul us on board as soon as we get alongside.

"All right, Mence," Chester encouraged the lad, as the water rose above their knees. "Now, go. Go, damn it!" He pushed the reluctant boy further out. "Come on, come on. That's it. Good boy. Hurry!" Chester seized him by the hair as he slackened speed an instant. "Come on, give her hell. Good work . . . Give us a hand, boys. Up you go!" They had reached the side of the launch and were hauled on board a bare second before two inquisitive sharks nosed around the stern.

"Back to the ship, cox'n," directed Chester. "And if any of you men can spare a little clothing, let Mence have it. Must be pretty cold."

SIX days later the messenger, having finished his enforced diet of bread and water, and again on duty, slouched to the gangway as Lieutenant Chester called for him. For an instant the two gazed at each other. This was the first time they had met since the "punishment mast," at which Mence had received, through the testimony of Chester, a magnificent dressing down from the commanding officer. This, in addition to his confinement, loss of liberty and an order to repay the twenty dollars for the native boat.

"Mence," observed the lieutenant, "I thought you had possibly learned something, but I guess not." Then his voice hardened. "Throw that cigaret away and never smoke on duty again! Understand? Put your hands to your side. Square your hat. Turn down your trousers. Straighten up. Get a haircut immediately you go off watch. That's better. Report eight bells and that the chronometer's wound."

"Very well, sir," answered the Menace with sudden alacrity. "But, Mister Chester, may I ask you one question?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"If you dislike me so much, why did you take all the risk for me the other night?"

Chester hesitated a second before replying. Mence had been in the Navy just five months. Too short a time to learn much of the real meaning of the service. But, in spite of his general attitude, the boy had good points. His attire was frequently careless, but both it and his person were always clean. And he invariably met your rebukes with fearless eyes. And, while he might evade, he wouldn't lie. He was intelligent, the kind that would learn. Would, under the proper treatment, make a good man-o'-war's man. Chester had seen hundreds, almost, but not quite, as bad, finally get their bearings. He placed a friendly hand on the Menace's shoulder.

"Dislike you? I don't dislike you, Mence. I'm just trying to make a sailorman out of you. One that will be a credit to his ship and the Navy. A man that will leave the service, and be proud to tell civilians that he did a four year hitch in it. Sometime, you're going to learn just why I'm doing all this for you. You haven't got the word yet, but you will some day. And when you do get it, it will be just as big a help to you if you go out into civil life as if you remain in the Navy. The word itself isn't big as what it actually means."

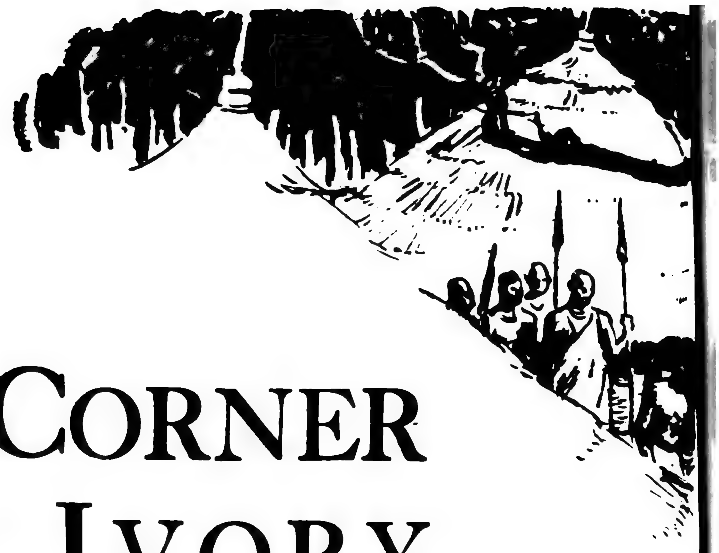
The messenger gazed at this officer whom he had just this instant begun to know. The tingle of that hand on his shoulder went through him like an electric shock. Never before had he realized that it was possible for an officer to be also a friend to an enlisted man. He nodded his head slowly, and a new expression crept into his eyes, replacing the former one of studied insolence. The salute which he suddenly rendered was more than regulation in its alertness and spontaneity.

"I think I know that word now, sir," he declared earnestly.

And Chester knew that henceforth the feud was ended, that the boy had found himself and was now a man-o'-war's man.

"Yes sir, I know now," he continued. "You did it because we are shipmates."

A
Complete
Novelette



A CORNER IN IVORY

A Swiftly Moving Story of Africa and the Fate of a Fortune in Illicit Ivory

By KELMAN FROST

THE whir of the camera ceased. Andy Wallace grunted with satisfaction as he replaced the dust proof cover and waved to the man lounging among the ruins which occupied the center of the scene.

"Good enough, Van. That was dandy."

The South African nodded and strode across the *maramba* towards their little camp. Maybe he thought the American a fool to come all the way to the Kaokoveld in order to make films of a few tumbledown walls, but he was far too polite to show it.

Andy watched his lithe, easy movements, and wondered exactly how much he really owed to Van der Niekerk. Without the good fortune of that lucky meeting at Zesfontein, he would have been without a guide; and nobody unaccompanied by a good guide could ever hope to penetrate that mysteriously unknown portion of Southwest Africa called the Kaokoveld, or "the Land of the Thirst Trekkers."

This place where they had been for two days was Gauko Otavi, a spot that had been the *rustplaats,* or resting place, of those grim pioneers who had trekked there in 1876, stopping only for a few years before the wanderlust again gripped them and sent them northwards to Angola.

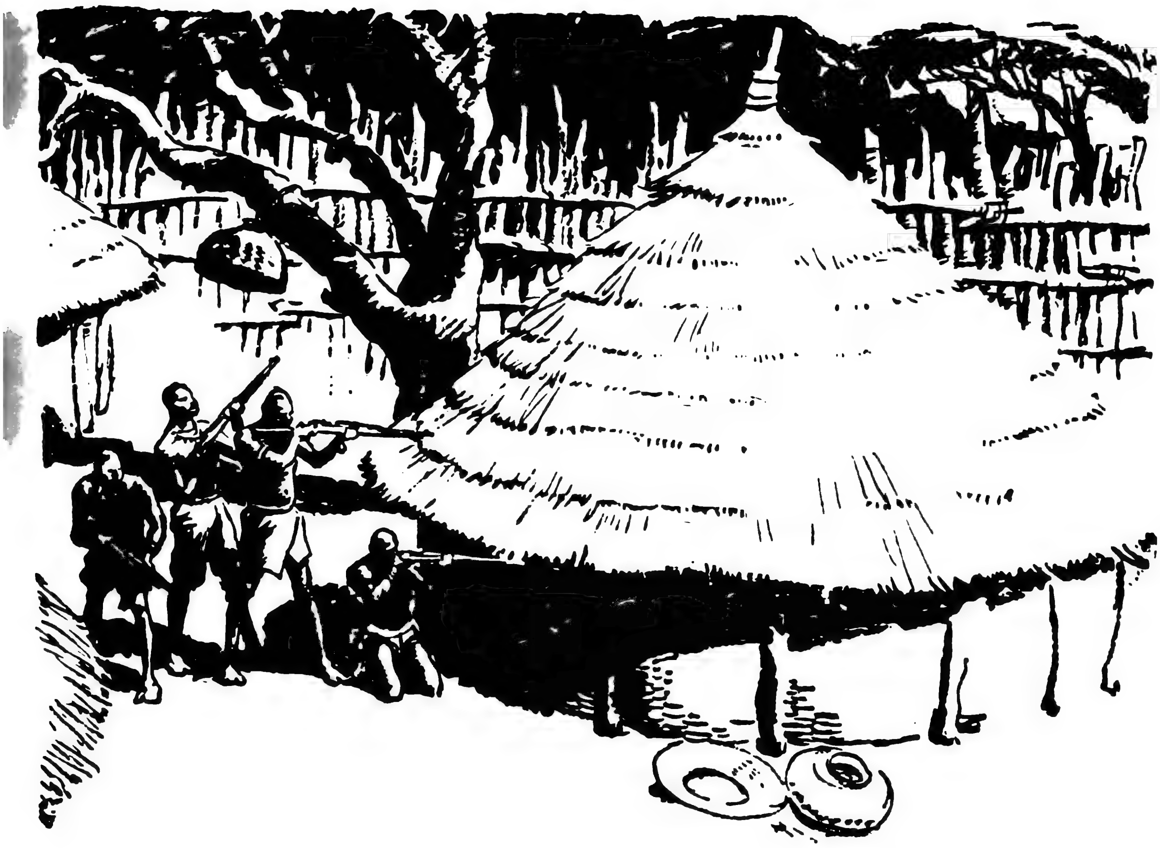
"Queer old birds those Boers must have been," thought the camera man, as he shouldered his apparatus. But he did not say this aloud, for Van der Niekerk's father had been one of the original band of trekkers, one who wisely settled in the lush country round Zesfontein instead of seeking a new Utopia to the north.

Van was busy with the frying pan; and whatever its contents, they smelt good. Hovering in the background was Buya the little piccaninny, whose task it was to do odd jobs about the camp and look after the watering of the animals.

Andy Wallace could never help grinning when he looked at the scratch bunch of beasts that formed their caravan. There were two riding donkeys, a pack ox, and a sturdy little Portuguese pony, all proof of the cleverness of Van, for each of those four legged brutes represented long and patient argument with reluctant natives.

"Well, Van, that finishes me here. Tomorrow we can push on. That's the direction, eh?"

He indicated a tumbled mass of bush



covered mountains athwart the valley, mountains which even Van der Niekerk had never visited, and which he declared had never been trodden by the feet of white men.

That was what intrigued Andy Wallace, of the Tropical Features Corporation. He had come to Africa accompanied by an old-timer, Dennis Moore. Moore had been in charge of the party, for he was a camera man of vast experience, a man who had traveled Africa and the East in search of out-of-the-way subjects for the screen.

It had been Moore's suggestion that they should follow the Trail of the Thirstland Trekkers and film a country which is to this day more unknown than Tibet. But Moore had been unlucky. Down in Windhoek, while they were waiting for necessary papers and permission to visit the northern territories, he had taken a toss from a horse and broken his leg. Now he lay in the Cottage Hospital, of that township, cursing his luck, while Andy had gone forward to see what he could do lone-handed.

As has already been mentioned, he had met his Boer companion in Zesfontein, working on the farm left him by his father, and it had not taken much persuasion to make Van offer his services. To one who had been a scout for the German Colonial Army in the Herero Campaign during 1905 and '06, the trail was always an insistent temptation. Furthermore, Van der Niekerk had never been further than Gauko Otavi, and the unknown pulled mighty hard.

"*Ja.* That is the direction," said the Boer, in his very precise English. "Now we leave the trail and trust ourselves to the elephant paths. There's no other way of entering the country, but the elephants are good engineers. Where they go we can go."

"Elephants!" Andy's eyes sparkled. "Plentiful around here, eh?"

"Said to be the richest elephant preserve left in the world. I don't know, but down at Zesfontein they say—" He shrugged his shoulders. "They say for a poacher this is paradise."

"Ever done any ivory poaching yourself, Van?" demanded Andy, leaning back against a giant *mopani.* "I bet you have!"

The Boer's face wrinkled, then straightened. He went on oiling his shotgun in abstracted fashion.

"Maybe. When I was young. Today I fight on the other side, my friend. When the Germans had this country I did not mind, for never did I forgive them for what they did to the Hereros, though I scouted for them and got well paid. Today it is different. South Africa holds what you call the mandate, and I draw pay from them. Not much, but it helps."

"Yes?" Andy was surprised. He had never suspected his guide of holding any kind of post under the British Administration. "What in the world's your job?"

The Boer smiled his slow smile.

"Almost it is not a job. I just watch the white men who go north from Windhoek. If there is anything suspicious about them I send in a report. I am always warned of their coming, for permission has to be received by all at Windhoek, just as you yourself had to obtain that permission. It is nothing that I do."

Andy thought otherwise.

"So you knew I was on my way up before I arrived? I suppose you haven't tacked yourself onto me just because you think I'm after elephant, eh?"

Van der Niekerk's grin was broader as he glanced at the camera equipment. It was not necessary to answer that question. No man without large bore guns could be suspected of seeking tuskers.

BUYA took away their few plates to be washed in the nearest running stream. The Boer systematically transferred his attentions to his gun, while Andy scraped away at a giant pair of springbok horns which he intended to keep as a souvenir. It was a peaceful scene. Very soon the sun would make its dive for the night, and blankets would be acceptable.

The shadows lengthened rapidly. Van der Niekerk stood his guns against a tree and replenished the fire.

"We move at dawn," he warned the American. Andy yawned. "Elephant paths are not easy going," the Boer added.

"Meaning I ought to pack down for the night. Guess I'll— Hullo! What's the matter with the piccaninny?"

Buya had been sleeping on the edge of the clearing. Now he jumped up with a whimper of fear and came running towards them.

"Lions!" thought Andy, as he reached for his rifle. But it was not a tawny head that was revealed when the bush parted.

Four men mounted on donkeys rode into the camp, and at first glance Andy thought them Europeans, for they wore a similar outfit to his own, carried rifles and had broad brimmed veld hats tilted over their faces.

But when the firelight fell on their dusky faces, he realized they were Hereros; and the Dutch they used when they shouted a greeting smacked more of Angola than of the Southern Union.

They were hulking great fellows and moved with a swagger that was not lost on the American. Instinctively his hand tightened on his rifle, for he had heard how the remnants of the Herero nation hated the arrival of white men in what they now considered their country.

These were the natives, of the Bantu race, who had been driven into the Kalahari by the Germans in the '06 campaign, after all waterholes had been poisoned or filled in. Only a fragment of their number had reached the Kaokoveld, where they had now assumed dominance over the rightful native owners of the country. They all walked with the air of conquerors, and it was the fear of the British depriving them of this dominance over the pastoral Mahimbas that made them so unfriendly to travelers.

These four seemed affable enough, and Van der Niekerk exchanged greetings quite readily. Andy knew a few words of Dutch, but none of the dialects, and he drew back in the shadow to allow Van to conduct the conversation.

The visitors seemed in high spirits, but Andy, watching closely, fancied his guide's mirth was mostly assumed. Something was worrying Van, though he tried hard not to show it.

"What's the matter? What do they want?" demanded the camera man, at length. He spoke bluntly and quickly, believing the visitors would not understand.

"Not so swiftly!" begged Van der Niekerk. "If you speak English slowly, with trouble, it will be better. You are supposed to be Portuguese."

"What the hell!" exploded the American. "Portuguese!"

"I have told them you speak to me in English because I understand no Portuguese and you speak no Dutch," went on Van. "There is something queer about them."

"But what do they want? Are they after loot?" Andy's thoughts jumped at once to his precious spools in their tin case. There was not much else of value in the outfit.

"No! It seems they expect us and have come to guide us to Oorlo, their chief. They say the ivory is ready, but they're surprised we haven't brought bearers with us."

"The—what?"

"The ivory. That is why I say there is something queer about them. It seems to me they have made a mistake. Someone else it was they should have met here at the ruins of the old church, and as we camped here, and as we are white, they've mistaken us for the ones they expected."

The Hereros were listening intently, watching first the Boer's face, and then the American's.

"Then tell 'em we're the wrong party. There needn't be any mistake. I'm not a blasted dago. How can they mistake me for a Portuguese?"

"You are in charge here," said Van simply. "If you order me to explain that to them I will do so, but for myself I would rather we played the deception a little longer. This talk of ivory interests me. It seems you are supposed to be called 'Calvos,' and my name should be 'Bechuana Piet.' You have not been long in the country, or you would have heard that Bechuana Piet is the most notorious ivory poacher in Africa. From Tanganyika to Angolaland he is sought by British, Belgian, and Portuguese. It interests me to be taken for him. With your permission. . . ."

"By gosh!" gasped Andy, understanding what was meant. "I get you. You think there's an ivory smuggling plot afoot and we've landed in the thick of it . . . Go ahead! Do whatever you like, Van. Tell 'em I'm the son of Calvos, and that my dad is coming on later with the bearers. Tell 'em any tale that'll keep 'em guessing."

The Boer's eyes sparkled. He was no longer the guide, but the unofficial secret agent of the Union Government.

"But your pictures? You came here to make pictures. If we find ourselves in danger——"

"To hell with the films!" growled Andy. "I've got a good enough batch already. I can take films any day, but it's the first time in my life I've been mistaken for an ivory poacher. Count me in on this, Van!"

II

THAT night the four Hereros remained with them, and later Van der Niekerk came to Andy and told him that he had promised to accompany them to their chief the next day. He had introduced Andy as the son of the notorious Paolo Calvos, explaining that Calvos had been delayed after passing the Kunene River, but that he would arrive in a day or so with his bearers. Meanwhile, they would go and see Oorlo, the Herero overlord.

The plan delighted Andy. The only worry he had was about his camera and films, which hardly fitted in as the baggage of a supposed ivory poacher; but they solved that problem by creeping into the ruined church while their visitors slept, and hiding the telltale equipment under loose blocks of stone.

The Boer then had a private talk with the piccaninny. What he told the child Andy did not know, but by the morning Buya had disappeared, and when the Hereros inquired after him they were told he had been sent back to hasten the bearers' progress.

"Hm!" thought Andy. "More likely gone back to Zesfontein with a report. It'll be ten days before help can arrive, so it looks as though Van and I've just got to help ourselves."

They all breakfasted on a springbok brought down by one of the Hereros, and were early on the trail.

First came an arduous climb up a boulder strewn *schlucht*, the old bed of a river that had changed its course. Then real bush was entered, and Van der Niekerk's prophecy about having to follow elephant paths was fulfilled.

This was no easy going. Elephants trample their paths very smooth, and they have a fine eye for gradient, but their tracks are little more than two feet wide. So the party had to proceed in single file, two of the Hereros going ahead, and two at the rear. Van and Andy exchanged glances when they noticed how they were hemmed in by their guides, but they wisely made no comment.

By midday a waterhole was reached, and here they rested. Andy noticed traces of lions, elephants, gemsbok, zebra and koodoo, as well as the spoor of some animals he could not name. The place must have been a veritable game paradise, and he only wished for the chance to spend a night hidden there with his camera.

Then he remembered he had to put thoughts of movies behind him. This adventure was sterner business. They had only kept up a deception that had been suggested by their guides, but that did not mean the penalty would be any the less if they were discovered. For all they knew, this Oorlo might recognize his expected visitors on sight, and when they reached his *stad* they might be instantly denounced.

Andy could only guess what their fate would be under those circumstances. Van der Niekerk had already assured him that there was no white man, neither policeman, prospector, missionary, nor trader, within a week's journey in any direction. They could not hope for outside aid.

This made it all the more thrilling. And when the trek was renewed, with the sun considerably lower, Andy's heart was thumping, not with terror, but with anticipation.

They were now well up in the mountains, which seemed to rise in endless terraces before them. It was a wonderful pasture country, and near every waterhole they found herds of cattle and flocks of sheep.

These seemed always to belong to a member of the Hereros, and they were tended and herded by the childlike Mahimbas, the original owners of both land and cattle, now little more than slaves to the usurpers and apparently fairly content with their lot.

The Mahimbas were of good physique, and Andy wondered how a handful of fugitives from the Kalahari could have imposed themselves upon these tribes and dominated them as they did. One peculiarity of the Mahimbas he noticed was that each man wore round his neck a section of sheep intestine which was filled with grease. As the wearer got hot this grease exuded and automatically supplied lubrication to his skin. The Mahimbas never used water on their bodies.

Practically every member of this tribe wore sandals of giraffe skin. The tall grass of the valleys was a happy breeding place for the long necked giants.

Traveling slowly upwards all the afternoon, they came to a wide plateau about sunset. This was where Oorlo had his kraal, the spot from which the most powerful of the Hereros wielded despotic power over the country for many miles around.

NOW the critical time had come, and Andy noticed Van der Niekerk loosen his holster. They were met by a crowd of tall young men all mounted on swift donkeys. One of the guides told them that these were all sons of the paramount chief.

"Gee!" breathed Andy. "How many wives has the old rascal got?"

Their arrival had been already "wirelessed" ahead, and Oorlo was ready for them, surrounded by a dozen more of his sons, and a bodyguard of skinclad Mahimbas.

Again Andy had the feeling that he was meeting a European. Oorlo was a fine, upstanding specimen, dressed like a Boer farmer, white bearded and as straight as a sapling despite his seventy years.

The newcomers held their breath as he glared at them from his sunken eyes, but as there came no explosion they concluded he had never previously seen the men he was expecting.

He motioned them to the skin covered seats on either side of his own throne, and questioned them about their journey. Wallace was rather glad he did not know Dutch well enough to reply, for that threw all the responsibility upon Van, who rose to the task nobly.

"Me, you already know!" he told Oorlo grandly. "I am Bechuanaland Piet. This is the son of Paolo Calvos, and we have come ahead to warn you that our bearers will be here in two days. The Kunene was in flood. We had trouble with those much accursed patrols, but Calvos will not fail us. Tomorrow you must send more guides down to the *rustplaats*, to await them."

Andy followed some of the conversation, for Oorlo prided himself upon his good Dutch. But for the most part the camera man looked around at the big kraal, at the spacious storehouses, the strong stockade and the building with the wide stoop that was the chief's own residence. This Oorlo must be a wealthy man, thought Andy, and he seemed to rule his people with a rod of iron, for even his own sons saluted and stood to attention when they spoke to him.

The sun set just after their arrival, and great gates were swung closed at either end of the kraal. Whether they wished or not, thy could not leave the kraal until morning. Andy was glad to find Van looking so cool and collected as he spoke to the ancient filibuster. For his own part he was wondering how they were ever going to get out again.

Half an hour later the sounding of a horn outside the gate brought a crowd of men to the substantial barrier, which was swung open for a few minutes to admit half a dozen pack oxen tended by Mahimbas, followed by armed Hereros. They had been expected, for old Oorlo looked up from his seat and beamed upon them as he pointed to the loads carried by the oxen.

Gleaming tusks, still red at the butts, were tied to the backs of the oxen, some having two and others three. It was ivory, newly gathered, product of a hunt which had only just finished. Andy began to realize that cattle and sheep rearing were not the only industries of this tribe.

They all went over to see the tusks weighed and put in the storehouse, a huge hut with stone walls at the back of Oorlo's residence. The old chief himself lifted a lantern so that the rays fell about the walls of the interior.

Andy Wallace gasped. Ranged right round the circular building, side by side like rifles in a rack, were other tusks, scores of them, hundreds of them. In the center, piled carelessly as though they were of no account, were smaller specimens —those under a hundred pounds. There must have been three hundred of these alone.

Oorlo laughed when he saw his visitors' eyes widen, and carefully double-locked the door as they left.

"Can ivory such as that be found these days in the Congo?" he asked Van der Niekerk. "Is it not worth traveling a long way to see?"

THAT evening they dined with Oorlo in his hut. Later they were shown a thatched *kia* of their own, given skins to supplement their blankets—for the nights were cold up there—and told to sleep well.

But sleep was out of the question. Andy was bursting with a thousand questions, and Van der Niekerk was ready to tell him all he had discovered.

"It's the biggest find of the century," declared the Boer with conviction. "For seven years Oorlo has been adding to that store, and the fact the Union Government has forbidden hunters licenses to shoot in the Kaokoveld has made it all the easier for him to get the spoils. He tells me not one of those four hundred elephants has been shot."

"Then how on earth—" began the camera man.

"Traps and pits. His men have taught the Mahimbas how to dig great pits by the waterholes, with sharpened stakes lining the bottom. Into these the tuskers have fallen, and either been left to die of starvation, or speared till they died through loss of blood. In other places he's poisoned the waterholes. He told me he caught a whole herd like that. Other ivory poachers I have heard of in my time, but Oorlo is a wholesale killer."

"We'll sure never get out of here alive if he discovers we're not the men he thinks," drawled Andy.

"*Ja,* that is so. That is why I am sorry you came with me. Luck brought us here ahead of Bechuana Piet and his party, but they will come, that is certain. Before the last rainy season Oorlo sent them a message telling them what to expect if they came here, and he has since had word that they are near. He is not giving the ivory away, but the price he asks is so absurd they'll jump at the chance."

"How much?" asked the American.

"Of money, none at all! Money is no good up here. Oorlo has asked for so many rifles, so much ammunition, a gramophone, a bicycle. And clothes, loads of clothes."

"Clothes!"

"Yes, just the same as you and I wear.

That is the weakness of the Hereros. They like to pretend they are white men, far above the ignorant savages, and the easiest way they know of making themselves different is by dressing in riding breeches, shirts and hats. So Oorlo had demanded loads of clothes for all his men. It will be the biggest bargain of Bechuana Piet's career."

"And if he finds us in possession?" asked Andy.

The Boer shrugged his broad shoulders.

"That cannot be helped. Buya has been sent to Zesfontein with news of my suspicions. Word will be sent from there to Windhoek. That is four hundred miles from here. A force will be raised. But they can come by rail only as far as Otani. After that they will still have more than two hundred miles to trek. The men of the Southwest Service move swiftly when there is necessity, but in no way can they reach here in less than a fortnight."

Andy looked grim.

"Well? Aren't you expecting the real ivory buyers to turn up before then?"

"*Ja.* In two or three days, maybe tomorrow, they will come. But I have a plan. When they come we must shut ourselves in the storeplace of the ivory. It is the only brick and stone building in the kraal. It has been designed as a fort as well as a storeplace, and because of the ivory they dare not burn it down. If we were in there, with plenty of ammunition and food, we could hold out for a week."

"Huh!" grunted Andy. "Cooped up in that beehive of a place for a week!"

Van der Niekerk fixed him solemnly with his brown eyes.

"It is not your work. I know that. You have no business to be here. I, alone, can hold that place against any number of men until the military police arrive. Tomorrow I will tell Oorlo that you must hasten to your father. You will be taken down to the *rustplaats.* It will be easy for you to escape them, easy to make your way to Ombombo and then to Zesfontein. You——"

"Hold on!" exclaimed the camera man, clutching the Boer by the arm. "Is your plan for me to quit and leave you to all this by yourself? Is that the big idea?"

Van nodded, then drew back his head as a useful fist was shaken under his nose.

"Then forget it," advised Andy crisply. "What do you take me for? This is the biggest adventure of my life, and I'm going to see it through. Just you book me for a front seat, Van, or I'll never forgive you. There's someone else we ought to have in that storehouse as well as ourselves, someone who'll be mighty useful."

"*Ja?* You say——"

"Old Oorlo himself If we can get him in there with us as a hostage, the battle'll be half won. He'd be worth a good dozen rifles on our side."

A smile creased Van's bronzed face. Slowly he put out a calloused hand and gripped Andy's.

III.

ANDY was astir early the next morning, watching the cattle being driven out of the kraal by the Mahimba herdsmen. Every night they were brought in for fear of the lions, which were the biggest pest of the country.

But the film man's early morning walk also gave him a chance to study the storehouse more thoroughly. It had a commanding position, though a trifle too close to the chief's residence. As Van der Niekerk had pointed out, it was already loopholed.

"The trouble will be to get food and water in there," mused the American, but when he went back to the Boer he had a plan.

After the usual breakfast of mealies and fruit, they saw Oorlo again, and Van suggested they might be allowed to count and measure up the ivory in the storehouse.

"It will save much time when our party arrives," he pointed out.

Oorlo looked at them keenly, then nodded. Elephant tusks were not the kind of thing that could be smuggled out in anyone's pocket. He saw no reason for refusing them this privilege.

So presently they were within the gloomy, conical shaped building, pretending to count and weigh tusks, but actually hiding away in dark corners the ammunition they had brought there in their pockets. On various excuses they found it possible to return to their own hut several times, and on each occasion their pockets contained more ammunition, and even some tinned meat, when they went back to the storehouse.

During the afternoon they managed to smuggle biscuits and two or three small skins of water into the place, secreting everything behind the stacks of tusks.

It was going to mean decidedly short rations if the siege ever came off. Water would be the chief problem. The storehouse would become as hot as an oven during the heat of the day, and Andy did not like to think of what they would suffer if they were penned up in there without water.

All that day, and the next, they occupied themselves with the storehouse, ready at any time to barricade themselves in if the real Bechuana Piet and his companions arrived. It was not a pleasant period; they felt as though they were living on the edge of a volcano, and their nerves grew raw. Andy found himself glancing towards the gateway every few minutes. He had to take a tight grip on himself lest his anxiety should arouse Oorlo's suspicion.

To the Herero chief they had to pretend anxiety at the failure of the others to arrive, though in their hearts they were praying for as long a delay as possible.

Oorlo sent guides, and still more guides, to meet the expected caravan. The bombshell was liable to burst at any moment.

But every hour's delay gave them more hope of the police force arriving in time, and afforded them further opportunity to add to the store they had secreted among the ivory.

The fourth day dawned, and Oorlo invited them to join a lion hunt in the neighborhood. His stock had recently suffered so badly that he was organizing a big roundup of the brutes. He had hoped to let it wait until the caravan arrived, but now he declared he could delay no longer. Forty of his men, and a hundred of the Mahimbas, were going to take part in it. He promised some fine sport.

Here was another problem. To refuse meant annoying Oorlo; it would undoubtedly make him suspect something. But if they went out on this hunt, and Bechuana Piet and the others arrived while they were away from the kraal, their plan of barricading themselves in the storehouse would fall through.

"*Hemmel!*", snorted Van. "I am too old for lion hunting. It no longer thrills me. I will sit here on the stoop and wait for my friends. Let young Calvos go. He is young and keen."

SO ANDY marched out with the hunters, and was surprised to see Oorlo himself joining them. Despite his age the paramount chief of the Hereros was as active as a twenty-year old.

Overnight some sick cows had been staked out as ground bait for the lions, and these had been half devoured. The hunters were therefore sure the brutes were somewhere in the neighborhood, waiting only for darkness to cover their return to the kill.

Oorlo's plan was not for the usual night watch, but for a hunt in broad daylight, and he accordingly sent fifty of the Mahimbas as beaters to operate from the far side of the valley. Their job was to advance and drive the hidden lions towards the waiting hunters, who were well treed.

Andy was young enough to feel the excitement of it all. The first time in four days he managed to forget the peril that hung over them. Since his arrival in the country he had never shot a lion, and to secure a good skin was one of his minor ambitions.

Oorlo gave him a fine position on one of the flanks, knowing the lions would make for the flanks when they sensed the presence of men directly ahead of them.

So Andy crouched in the fork of a tree and waited while the beaters took up their position, and it was not long before the distant uproar began.

The Mahimbas advanced in a long line, beating tom-toms and tin cans, rattling spears on shields, clapping flat stones together, in fact utilizing anything that would make a useful noise.

Waiting was the worst part. Andy felt almost suffocated by the wild beating of his heart, and all the time there was the professional regret that he had not his camera with him.

Then, away on the other flank came the sharp report of a rifle, followed by a wild fusillade. Someone had seen something.

The American hardly dared blink lest he should miss anything that came his way, and when he heard an unmistakable crashing in the undergrowth, he stopped breathing.

Oorlo was quite a hundred yards distant in another tree. Any lion that came this way was to be Andy's own special bag.

The bushes parted, and he found himself looking down upon a tawny giant which was bellying along almost flat to the ground, moving at a remarkable speed. It seemed to cover fifty yards in a flash, then stopped as Andy raised his rifle. The snapping of a twig had alarmed it.

Andy knew he would never have another chance like that. He fired, and had the satisfaction of seeing the brute rear upon its hind legs, bellowing with pain, tearing at its own mane with its forepaws. He had scored a hit, but he was not certain where, so he ejected the spent shell and fired again, behind the shoulder.

Now there was firing all along the line. Eight or nine lions had been sighted, but Andy scarcely heeded the din. He was watching the dying agonies of the brute he had shot. He felt as though he wanted to cheer. For the first time he tasted the joy of the successful killer. Ivory poaching and its complexities vanished entirely from his mind.

For quite five minutes he waited, while the dying lion tore up the ground in frenzy, then rolled on its side and lay still.

Andy dropped lightly from his perch and ran forward. He had been warned of the danger of taking it for granted that a lion was dead when it lay still, and had reloaded in case of trouble.

Not a movement of a muscle alarmed him. The beast was a magnificent male, in the prime of condition, with a set of teeth that would have done credit to a saber toothed tiger. Andy Wallace poked its ribs experimentally with the barrel of his rifle.

There came a low growl, more of a rumble than a snarl, and the American whirled to the right. It was not his victim that had growled, but another, a lioness, possibly the mate of the dead lion.

She sprang even as Andy jerked up his rifle, and he forgot to fire. Instead, he jumped madly to one side, felt a bush give beneath his smashing impact, found himself clawing at breaking branches, then lost his rifle as he went rolling down the side of a *spruit* which had been hidden behind the thick foliage.

THAT fall possibly saved his life as far as the lioness was concerned, for another outburst of firing from the directing of the tree where Oorlo was posted, scared the infuriated beast away, but Andy Wallace knew nothing of that, for his head had come in contact with a small boulder at the bottom of the *spruit*, and he lay still.

Hours sped by, the sun passed its zenith and began its downward slide to the horizon, but the camera man did not stir. From his head a thin trickle of blood had run for some time, staining a smooth stone beside him until the wound had dried and ceased to bleed any more.

The shadows were rapidly lengthening when he stirred and groaned, then put hands to his head and sat up.

He was inexpressibly thirsty, had big bruises on his side and his head seemed split in two. Cautious exploration with his fingertips told him it was only a scalp wound, but it took him ten minutes to achieve a standing position, and then he was faced with the problem of climbing the side of the *spruit*.

He remembered the charging lioness, and his backward jump, but nothing after that. Common sense told him what must have happened. The elated hunters had secured their spoils and returned to the kraal. He had either not been missed at all, or had been searched for and not discovered.

"Old Van'll be having three kinds of fits!"

He fumbled around in the darkness until he found his rifle, and used that as a stick to help him up the slope to the level of the ground above. He had come out on the opposite side to the one where he had killed the lion, and he did not wait to see whether the carcass was still there. He wished to reach Oorlo's kraal as soon as possible. Anything might have happened during his absence.

But Andy Wallace, like many another man, found that traveling through the African bush in daylight is a very different proposition to traversing the same stretch in the dark. He knew he was no more than a mile from the kraal, but he had no idea in which direction Oorlo's headquarters lay.

For a while he crashed about among the undergrowth in the hopes of finding a pathway, but his search was unrewarded. He tried shouting, guessing that a search party would be out after him, but got no response.

The correct thing would have been to climb a tall tree and look for the lights of the kraal, but the only trees were stunted acacias, no use for observation purposes. And Andy doubted whether he was fit enough to tackle a really big one, anyway.

He knew the danger of wandering aimlessly, but he could not keep still. His throat had almost closed with thirst; he must find water somewhere.

A downward slope confronted him a few minutes later, and he succumbed to temptation. It was easier going downhill, and he might find a waterhole at the bottom. Still using his rifle as a stick, he slithered downwards.

Then, from the bush below, came the sound of many voices and the tramp of bare feet. Someone laughed, and it was not the laugh of a native. Andy's heart jumped hopefully. It must be Van leading a search party.

"Hullo, there!" he yelled. "Hullo! Show a light, Van, I'm real scared of falling again."

The crackling of the undergrowth ceased. The whole party had stopped. There was silence for a moment, then: "*Si!* Who ees it?"

IV

"GOD!" groaned Andy Wallace. "It's not Van at all, but—but Calvos and his party."

For a moment or two the discovery left him so stunned that he could not even move. He could not see down there, but he sensed the presence of a large body of men. They were not searchers from Oorlo's tribe, but the bearers brought by the ivory poachers. The caravan Van and he had expected during the last four days, had at last arrived.

"Yes, who is it up there? Speak up!" came a hoarse growl from another of the party, who must have been Bechuana Piet. "Where in hell are yer?"

Then came a babble of excited voices, and a loud grunt from the last speaker. Someone among the crowd, probably one of the Herero guides, had recognized Andy's voice. The camera man had for the moment forgotten that the newcomers would know all about the impostors before they reached the kraal, for the Herero guides would certainly have told them about the two whites who were already with Oorlo.

Crack! Something snapped past quite close to his head. A rifle flashed in the darkness, just as Bechuana Piet yelled an order. The bush seemed to spring to life. A hundred men raced for the slope where Andy Wallace still hesitated.

It was not surprise that caused him to linger. He had got over that, but he was wondering what he could do for the best. The party was on its way to the kraal. Had Van de Niekerk been warned of their coming? Had Van been able to shut himself in the ivory store, or was he out seeking his lost partner in adventure?

If he heard shooting he would be sure to understand what was happening. Andy resolved to cause as much shooting as possible.

He remembered his own rifle had been loaded. Now he discharged it into the thick of the Angola natives who were being led up the hill by the Portuguese and his companion. Andy did not care if the bullet found a target or not. He wanted to anger them, to force them to chase him. In that way a disturbance would be raised that would give Van the warning he needed.

His head seemed to have miraculously cleared; his fatigue fell away from him as he was faced by the necessity for swift action.

Scrambling up the hill, he dived into the thickest undergrowth he could see, pausing just once to reload and fire again.

His ruse worked. The Angola boys had marched far that day, but now the lust of the chase drew from them an unsuspected reserve of strength. They did not need the terse commands of their masters, but streaked through the dense *mopani* like hunting dogs.

Very few of them were armed; but what weapons did a hundred need against one runaway? Bechauna Piet had ordered them to bring in the fugitive alive. He had just realized there was but one man running from him.

Andy hoped with all his soul that he was leading them away from the kraal.

Still uncertain of the position of Oorlo's headquarters, he was running without sense of direction. All he could do was to keep going until he had got his pursuers tangled up in the bush. But he soon found this was more likely to happen to him than to those who followed him. He fell many times, and at last lost his rifle. Thorns and briars shredded his clothing from the waist downwards; his arms were soon bleeding from contact with the branches that tried to whip his face, but he managed to save his eyes.

A loud crashing somewhere ahead made him imagine the natives had got round him. But it was only a giraffe, striding headlong from the scene of so much noise and alarm.

Then he came to boggy ground, and went knee-deep in water before he could sheer onto the harder ground to the left. This delayed him badly. He could hear the panting runners no more than fifty yards behind him.

ANDY was almost done. His mad burst of strength was followed by reaction of complete exhaustion. His knees grew hot and heavy, he stumbled over the least obstruction.

"No good!" he told himself, as he came to a boulder strewn slope. "Guess I'll stop while I've got a bit of kick left in me. The noise must have been heard at the kraal by this time. Van will have guessed."

Down he went behind a boulder, and waited for the foremost man to appear. The pursuers had heard him stop, and were now advancing at a walk, looking right and left with great caution. They did not know he was now unarmed, and suspected an ambush. Bechuana Piet was well to the van, yelling orders.

Then Andy sprang, throwing an arm about the neck of each of the nearest men, tumbling them over by the weight of his impact. Down went the three of them, and rolled to the bottom of the slope. It was the camera man's last throw, and he was going to make the most of it.

Each of his arms was tight crooked about a black neck. He had their heads together on his chest, and had pulled them across him as a shield against the expected spears. If he went under, they were going as well, thought Andy.

The two Angola men fought and writhed like wildcats; but their breath was almost cut off, and their closeness to his chest prevented them from getting at his throat. For a time they rolled over and over so swifly that none of the others could interfere.

The sweat poured down Andy's face. His strength was failing. His lungs heaved as though he was drowning, and the *thump, thump* of his heart seemed to fill his whole consciousness.

Then something clawed at one wrist, and dragged it backwards, allowing one of Andy's victims to roll clear. A pile of men leapt at the gap in his defences, and he was lifted to his feet, still clinging like a bulldog to his remaining opponent.

The touch of something cold on his hot neck, pressed almost to the bone, sobered his madness, and he heard a voice hissing in his ear.

"The young señor fights well, but it ees useless. Keep veree still or thees gun will go off."

Andy was too dazed to see anything, but he knew it must be the Portuguese adventurer who had him covered. He suddenly went limp, and would have fallen if others had not held him upright. The two men he had "cuddled" so fiercely lay senseless at his feet.

"So thees ees he who say he ees my son, eh?" came the small, deadly voice of Paolo Calvos. "I am honored, señor, to make the acquaintance."

Andy Wallace opened his eyes at that. In the dim light it was not possible to see much of the man, except that he was short and lean, black mustached, and dressed in dun colored drill. A big, massive brute of a fellow lurched to the side of the Portuguese, breathing hard after his run. He was bearded, with a bandoleer slung across his chest, Boer fashion.

"Bechuana Piet!" thought Andy, still struggling for breath. "Wonder if Van heard the shooting?"

The famous ivory poacher put his hairy face close to Andy's, stamped on the American's toe, and guffawed when he jumped with pain.

"Where's yer friend? Where's the *schelm* who takes my name, hey?"

Bechuana Piet might have had Dutch blood in him, but he had little trace of it in his speech. In the S. A. P. records he was put down as of British parentage, though with a Dutch mother. The probability was that the evil traits of half a dozen nations were inherited by this professional adventurer, but there was one thing even his bitterest enemies said of him. No man, black or white, knew the ways of wild beasts better than he did. No better tracker had ever lived.

"I don't know," panted Andy. "I——"

Thud! This time it was a rifle butt that had been dropped on the prisoner's toes, almost smashing them.

"Out with it, damn yer! Where's he skulkin'? Don't try to keep a tight mouth with me, or it'll be the worse fer yer."

Andy Wallace tried to break loose, but no less than six Angola boys were holding him before their master. He gulped his anger.

"I tell you I don't know, I was lost when I dropped across your party. There was a lion hunt this morning, and I fell into a *spruit* and got knocked out. I was trying to find my way back to the kraal."

Bechuana Piet lifted his rifle again; this time it was Calvos who stayed him. The Portuguese seemed to wear a perpetual grin.

"I t'ink he spik truth, Piet. In any case we can do not'ing tonight. The kraal is only a short distance away. Oorlo will know where this ozzer man ees . . . You want the prisoner keel?"

"No, bring 'im along," growled Bechuana Piet. "We've wasted enough time as it is."

His booming voice once more called the bearers, and Andy watched him kick and club the two half strangled natives to their feet. They all seemed in mortal terror of their leader, and if half the tales told of him were true, they had good cause.

Andy Wallace was tied with his hands behind him. A pole was then run across his back under his elbows, and a man stationed at each end. In this way they ran him along, sometimes almost swinging him from his feet. When he stumbled he nearly wrenched his arms from their sockets, but his escort only laughed.

AT LAST they came to the place where they had dumped their loads in order to take up the chase, but before they were in column of route again they were challenged from the bush on the other side. A score or more of Herero scouts on donkeys came bursting upon the scene, and for a few minutes everyone talked at once.

Andy recognized some of these men as Oorlo's personal bodyguard. They seemed frantically excited over something, but as he did not understand their lingo he could not gather what the trouble was.

Then the whole caravan surged forward towards the kraal, and when they topped a ridge a quarter of a mile further on, they saw the campfires in the Herero stronghold.

Andy needed no urging forward. What his own fate was going to be, he had scarcely considered. For him the burning question was whether or not Van der Niekerk had been able to make use of the warning he must have received. They could not reach the kraal fast enough for Andy.

At last they came to the open gates, where masses of Mahimbas awaited their arrival. A six-foot figure strode to greet Bechuana Piet, and Andy's hopes fell. It was Oorlo, who, if their plans had gone off correctly, would now have been shut in the ivory store as a hostage.

The Herero chief seemed savagely angry. He snarled when he saw the prisoner, but had a handshake, white man fashion, for Bechuana Piet and Calvos. These two seemed to treat the situation as a joke, and Piet shook the old man to his heels with a mighty slap on the back.

The bearers filed in ahead of their masters, and were counted as they passed. The hut that had previously been allocated to Van and Andy was now assigned to the real ivory buyers, and the loads were dumped at the doorway.

Still there was no sign of Van der Niekerk!

Two of Oorlo's men now took charge of Andy, hoisting him from his feet, and carrying him towards a small pole and *daga* hut. The camera man looked round him desperately, and saw Oorlo and the ivory buyers making for the big stoop where the Herero chief was going to entertain them.

The muffled report of a rifle, and a sudden yell from Oorlo, made him glance again.

Oorlo was stooping to retrieve the hat that had been whisked from his head.

Bechuana Piet and Calvos were running; and after Oorlo had paused long enough to shake his fist, he ran as well. None of them stopped until they were under cover of the stoop.

Then Andy was violently flung into the filthy interior of the *kia,* while his two guards knelt on him and lashed his ankles securely, but he felt almost light-hearted over it.

A weight had been lifted from his mind. He now knew Van der Niekerk had been able to carry out his part of the plan. Oorlo had shaken his fist in the direction of the ivory store. The bullet that had clipped his hat from his head must have been fired by Van, as a warning to them that movement in the center of the kraal was a perilous business.

Andy's self-sacrifice had done some good. Van had not been taken off his guard by this after sunset arrival of the caravan.

Rawhide *reims* were used to secure Andy to one of the stout roof props, and then he was left to the verminous darkness, parched with thirst, faint with hunger, sick with fatigue, and bruised in a dozen places.

The Hereros went no further than the outer door, where they leaned on their rifles and gazed across the compound towards the cattle lines, where the Mahimbas were entertaining the Angola boys with a feast of roasted sheep.

"And the police can't arrive for another nine days!" mused Andy. "Sure looks as though we're in for a real thin time, Van and I."

V

DURING the night an occasional rifle shot aroused Andy from the coma into which he had fallen. The Hereros were testing whether Van der Niekerk was on the alert, and evidently they found him very wide-awake, for no real attempt was made to organize a big attack. Bechuana Piet and his party were tired after their long trek, and indisposed for anything other than sleep.

Andy knew the morning would bring a different state of affairs. The newcomers would be wanting to see the ivory that had lured them so far. Calvos, Bechuana Piet and old Oorlo, would put their heads together to think out a way of dislodging the South African.

The camera man was not mistaken. Soon after dawn the sound of rifle fire redoubled, and he could tell that the Hereros had surrounded Van on all sides. Even his two guards went away to help in the attack, knowing full well that their captive was by this time too stiff to move.

The circulation in his limbs had failed. The rawhide *reims* no longer cut painfully into his flesh, for he had lost all feeling in it.

He tried to pick out the shots which were Van's, although he guessed the man in the ivory store would use as few cartridges as possible. There were several hundred rounds hidden away in there, but they might have to last the lone defender nine days.

It was some comfort to think of the thick stone walls that surrounded his friend. The chance of Van being hit was very remote. Even the solitary door was immensely strong and loopholed. As long as Van der Niekerk could keep awake, and had ammunition left, he would be safe.

The morning dragged on, and the sun blazing down upon the roof of the small *kia* added to Andy's torment. He was so dry that his throat felt like a furnace. He shouted to attract somebody's attention, but nobody heeded him until well on towards noon, when a Mahimba herdsman looked in, saw his condition, and returned with a pitcher of water that he held to the prisoner's lips.

Andy thanked the black man with his eyes. The savage had more humanity than either the Hereros or Bechuana Piet.

The lack of food did not worry the camera man so much, although it was now twenty-four hours since he had eaten anything.

His only comfort was to think of his captors' anger at the way they were being kept from the ivory. He could imagine Bechuana Piet frothing at the mouth in fury, for to reach this ivory the adventurer had led his caravan over hundreds of miles of veld and desert. Their trip from the Angola border must have been a hard one, and a man like Bechuana Piet would grudge every minute he was obliged to spend in British territory. Had he yet guessed that a message had been sent for aid?

The midday heat saw a temporary cessation of the attack. The Hereros and their guests were feeding, but they evidently talked things over to some effect, for soon afterwards Andy came round from semiconsciousness to find figures in the doorway.

Bechuana Piet was there, Calvos the Portuguese, and several of the Hereros. Oorlo was not present.

A grim smile twisted the ivory hunter's mouth as he stared at the captive. The sight of the half empty pitcher on the ground seemed to anger him, for he shattered it with one kick.

"Who in hell's been givin' him water?"

No one there knew, and Piet's fury soon passed. He strolled over to the American and lifted his chin so that he could gaze into the red rimmed eyes.

"Not sayin' anythin', eh? Still keepin' a tight mouth?" His teeth showed unpleasantly, broken, tobacco stained teeth. "What in tarnation yer grinnin' at?"

"You!" said Andy pointedly. "I was thinking how riled you must be about that ivory. After coming all this way it's too bad, eh, not to be able to get at it!"

Bechuana Piet lifted a clenched fist as though to dash it into Andy's defenseless face, then lowered it again.

"Yes, real funny, ain't it? You'll see the funny side o' the business presently. Your partner thinks we're goin' to sit out here an' play at snipers with him from now till doomsday. *Ja,* I don't think! He's goin' to open that door an' walk out to give himself up before tomorrow evenin', an' don't you forget it."

"You're crazy," the prisoner told him. "Van's got ammunition and food for more than a week. I helped take it there myself, so I know."

The ivory hunter nodded to some of the Hereros, who cut the American down from the post, leaving his arms still tied behind his back. But as soon as Andy's ankles were unfastened, and the blood flowed back into his feet, he promptly fell forward in a faint. The agony of returning circulation was too much for him in his weakened condition.

HE CAME round to find water being dashed over him at Bechuana Piet's command. Calvos was rubbing his hands together as though enjoying the proceedings. For the first time Andy Wallace felt really scared. What were they going to do to him?

"Bring him along!" snapped the ivory poacher curtly, and led the way out into the baking hot compound.

Andy noticed they carefully kept a line of huts between them and the place where Van der Niekerk was on the defensive. Evidently they had already tasted something of the South African's marksmanship.

They reached the stoop where Oorlo was sitting in state, and some discussion in Dutch took place between the Herero chief and Piet. Bechuana Piet seemed to have his way at last, and he had Andy dragged to the corner of a hut that was just out of range of the vigilant Van.

Some very scared looking Mahimbas were present, and when Piet ordered them to take Andy they did so, with evident reluctance. But the threat of a revolver in the ivory poacher's hand effectively quelled their shyness in obeying.

To the camera man's surprise his arms were untied from behind his back, but before he could get any ease from this freedom more ropes were tied to his wrists, and the Mahimbas carried him round the corner in full view of the barricaded store.

A shot rang out, and one of the Mahimbas dropped without a sound. Some of the others were on the verge of releasing Andy in order to run, but Bechuana Piet roared at them from behind cover, and the dread of his revolver was to them more potent than fear of Van der Niekerk.

At the back of this hut one of the roof props projected for several feet, and the Mahimbas now crowded round Andy, lifted him, and tied him by his wrists so that he dangled with his feet clear of the ground.

Then they ran for their lives, leaving the camera man suspended in the sun.

Another shot followed them, and yet another of their number paid the penalty, but the Hereros and Bechuana Piet did not seem to care how many Mahimbas they lost, and Van had not dared shoot when the natives were about his friend, for fear of hitting Andy.

"Hullo, there, Van der Niekerk!" came Piet's triumphant shout from well round the corner. "Still made up yer mind to be shy an' stop inside?"

Not a sound came from the ivory store,

though the South African must have been crouching at one of the loopholes.

"Just a little idea o' mine to persuade you to come out," went on the adventurer. "If you come out we'll cut the Yankee down an' shoot yer both comfortable like. But he's hanging there till yer decides to throw in yer hand, an' you'll get a lot o' fun watchin' him in the sun. Don't hurry yerself about decidin'. Tomorrow'll do as well as today. He'll be gettin' used to it before mornin'."

His hideous laugh was followed by a burst of Dutch from the ivory store. What Van told them Andy could not understand, but it must have been something mighty raw, for Bechuana Piet could be heard growling with rage.

Andy moistened his swollen lips. He wanted to say something before his senses left him, before the sun made him delirious.

"Don't take any notice of 'em, Van!" he yelled. "You've got 'em beaten while you hold the ivory, and they know it. Don't worry about me. Better one of us should die than both."

"Better you had not been here at all, my friend," came back Van's sorrowful reply. "I should be happy if I were alone."

Bechuana Piet guffawed again.

"Go on bein' happy, an' watch the Yank enjoyin' himself. Before tomorrow mornin' he'll be callin' upon you to shoot him. Think it over while I get a drink."

Andy longed to faint, but found that his head had become uncannily clear. He fully realized the alternatives offered his friend. They had left it to Van to save Andy from torture by dooming them both to immediate death. Being unable to rush the South African, they had conceived this cunning plan. He would be left unmolested, but he would be forced to watch Andy Wallace dying in torment before his eyes.

The camera man groaned, not at his own suffering, but at the thought of the mental anguish Van der Niekerk must have been enduring.

TIME passed. Sometimes Andy was conscious and clear headed, then he would become mercifully buried in the blackness of oblivion, only to come back to a world of agony and heat when the pain of his swollen arms penetrated his coma.

It was worse than useless for him to struggle. That only threw additional strain upon his arms. Strain as he did, he could not reach the baked earth even with his toes. Sometimes he felt like fulfilling Piet's prophecy and yelling for Van to shoot him, but he knew that would only increase the agony of the Boer's mind, so the few times when he did summon strength to shout it was to tell Van that things were not as bad as they looked.

"My arms are numb," he called. "Can't feel a durned thing, Van. I'm quite enjoying myself, but for the heat."

Later Bechuana Piet, Oorlo and the Portuguese, all came to the end of the hut and jeered from safe cover.

A sudden shot from the ivory store chipped a sliver of wood from the corner post within a foot of Oorlo's head, and made him duck. It was dangerous to show as much as the tip of a finger when Van was looking along the sights. The scoundrels kept back after that.

The sun was sinking towards the horizon. In a few minutes it would dip beyond the top of the stockade, and part of Andy's torture would be lessened.

The American strained his eyes towards the store. He hoped Van would not try anything rash during the night. Tomorrow, if the worst came to the worst, Van could shoot him and put him out of his misery.

The shadow of the tall stockade now reached his feet, now crept up his dangling legs to his thighs. Brilliant to the last, the sinking sun left his face, gilded his strained arms with its last rays, and almost reached his bursting wrists.

Crack! The suddenness of Van's shot made Andy jump, and the next second he found himself dangling only by one wrist. The South African had picked out the rope in the last of the sunlight, and had severed it close to the pole overhead.

Crack! Not two seconds later the other rope was cut in two, and Andy Wallace fell in a quivering heap to the ground beneath. The sun passed up over the thatched roof of the *kia,* and left the compound altogether. It began to darken at once.

Now the man in the ivory store was shooting as fast as he could reload, putting down a rapid fire barrage on the corner where the enemy were nearest.

"Run!" came his voice. "Run for the door. I'll hold them back for you. Run, Wallace."

VI

RUNNING was the one thing Andy Wallace found impossible just then. The relief to his strained arms came so suddenly that the pain of it nearly made him scream. He lay face downwards, his nose in the dust, listening to the uproar Van der Niekerk's feat had provoked, quite unable to take advantage of his freedom.

Van had his rifle lined on that corner. It was death for any man to show himself. They were firing wildly from adjacent huts, but their target was an invisible one, and even Andy, out in the open, was a difficult object to see now the light was failing.

Every minute made it darker, and every minute gave the released camera man a new feeling of strength and confidence.

Van had done his bit. He had behaved magnificently, timing his shots just when the light was about to fail. The rest was up to Andy Wallace.

His pain, his exhaustion, seemed to have given him extraordinary clarity of brain. As he hugged the ground he was doing some hard thinking. It helped him forget the throbbing agony of his wrists.

The door of the ivory store was doubtless unfastened. Van der Niekerk was waiting for him to rush to safety, but there was fifty yards of open ground to be covered, and Andy could hear the bullets *zip zipping* against the stone walls towards which he would have to make.

It would be the worst of luck to be shot down after enduring so much.

"Keep it up, Van. I'm coming," he yelled.

That provoked a fresh outburst of firing from the Hereros and their allies. They had understood what Andy meant, and promptly filled the clearing with bullets.

Andy Wallace began to crawl, not towards the storehouse, but along the lee of the hut, to the corner furthest from that where Bechuana Piet and the others crouched.

None of the Hereros was at this corner, for it was exposed to Van's fire, though he was not shooting that way for the moment. Andy reached it on his stomach, and lay exhausted for a while. His strength ebbed and flowed in fits and starts. If he did what he intended to do it would be only will power that got him through.

Continuing his way, thankful for the darkness, he came to the rear of the hut, behind the knot of men who were kneeling and shooting round the near corner.

Not one of these thought their late victim would take any direction other than that towards his friend. No one saw Andy creeping up behind them, and the noise was so great that the slight scuffling of his movement passed unnoticed.

Bechuana Piet was there, the Portuguese, old Oorlo, and half a dozen of his Hereros. All were blazing away into the darkness, determined to kill Andy before he could crawl the distance to the ivory store.

Calvos stifled a scream, and dropped his rifle. His left arm swung limply. Van der Niekerk still had the range.

That caused them to flatten the tighter to the side of the hut, but nobody looked around. Bechuana Piet was growling in the Herero dialect. Oorlo snapped back some reply. They were on the verge of a quarrel.

Andy gathered himself for a big effort. He could now use his arms again; his legs would fulfil their duty of supporting him. He was watching old Oorlo now. The Herero chief was using a rifle, but at the back of his belt the butt of a six-shooter protruded. That black, well worn handle fascinated Andy.

A quick dive forward, a sudden lunge, and the revolver was in his grasp. He had emptied two shots into the center of the group before old Oorlo could turn.

The effect was remarkable. Bechuana Piet doubled up with a bullet in his leg, and went down roaring with pain. The others whirled in panic at this unexpected attack from the rear, but before they could do anything Andy had Oorlo by the neck with one hand. He prodded the business end of the revolver in the center of his back and rushed him forward.

"Don't shoot, Van!" he yelled. "Don't shoot. It's me."

But for the touch of the loaded revolver, Oorlo would have made a stout resistance, for he was not the type to give in tamely. His empty rifle was still gripped in one hand; he tried to beat at the man behind him.

Andy jerked up the revolver and sent

a shot through the man's graying hair.

"If you stop, you're a dead 'un. Keep going, and you'd better tell your pals to stop shooting until you get to cover."

The Herero could have understood none of this, but the whine of his men's bullets made him alive to the danger they were running out there in the open. He dropped his rifle and shouted something hoarsely and the shooting ceased; but figures broke cover on all sides and dashed to cut them off.

Then Van der Niekerk went into action again. The light was enough to show him these newcomers, and his bullets sought out two of them before they had gone a dozen paces.

That slowed them up. Andy Wallace made a supreme effort, still forcing Oorlo ahead of him. Suddenly he saw the door of the storehouse open before him.

"Goot! Who have you got there?" came the voice of the South African. "Himmel! Oorlo himself!"

The great door slammed into place as Andy and his prisoner fetched up against a stack of tusks. Big bolts slid back, and almost immediately Van's rifle cracked again.

There was only one thing to be done, and Andy did it. He swung the butt of his borrowed revolver once to Oorlo's head, and the Herero chieftain went down like an ox hit with a pole ax. It was the only way Andy could have handled his prisoner. Van had his hands too full to help.

While the camera man secured Oorlo with the man's own belt and bandoleer, Van der Niekerk beat off the fiercest attack he had yet met. Andy was able to reach a loophole and blaze away a few shots with the revolver before the infuriated Hereros broke and ran for cover again.

Van mopped his face. The place was like an oven.

"It is well the dogs understand the strength of these walls. They know they would not live long enough to break through . . . But I saw nothing of Bechuana Piet in the rush!"

"He's wounded," Wallace told him, as he slithered down to the beaten earth floor with his back to the wall. "I—I . . . Water, Van!"

The Boer dared not show a light, for that would have brought bullets through the loopholes; but he knew where everything was in his tiny fortress, and a moment later he was kneeling beside Andy, holding a waterskin to his parched mouth, warning him to drink slowly.

Some biscuit and meat followed from their scanty store, and then the American felt strong enough to tell what had happened to him since they had last parted.

BY THAT time Oorlo had recovered his senses and poured foul threats upon them, describing in detail what he would have his men do to them when they were captured.

Van der Niekerk dragged the Herero chief to the front of the hut and held a knife to his throat.

"You'll never live to see anything happen to us, my friend, unless you do as you're told."

Despite his years, old Oorlo loved life, as Van knew; within three minutes the Herero was groveling and whining for mercy. What was it the white man wished him to do? He would do anything if his life was spared. He was at their mercy.

Then Van der Niekerk showed his generalship. None knew better than he that two of them could hardly hope to live through another eight days of attack. There was only one rifle and the revolver between them, and water was already short.

He resolved to play a bold hand, and make full use of the hostage Andy had brought in.

"Oorlo, listen to me! Troops and police are on the way here—a large command of them with many guns. Within eight days they will be battering at the gates of your kraal, and as you have broken the law by stealing all this ivory you will be punished. But you will not be killed. The British will spare your life. I can give my word on that."

"*Ja?*" growled the hostage sullenly. "What then?"

"But if your men rush us and seem like getting in, or if our ammunition runs low, I promise you by that same word that we shall kill you before they can get us. We have but little food, so for those eight days we have to wait for the British we can give you not one mouthful."

"What talk is this?" gasped the Herero. "You spare my life, yet starve me to death. You talk in riddles."

"You are still the chief of the Hereros," Van pointed out. "Speak to your people from this loophole. Bid them seize the man called Bechuana Piet and his friends. Bid them hold these against your life, and at the same time command them to send unarmed Mahimbas every morning to this door with fresh food and water. In that way only can you live, Oorlo."

It took some time to convince the stubborn old man, and Andy Wallace dozed through most of the argument, but when he awakened it was daylight, fresh food stood on the floor of the hut. Van der Niekerk was wide eyed and very much on the alert, while Oorlo fed greedily in a corner.

"Hullo, Van, I——"

"You slept eight hours, my friend, and you needed it. You slept through the noise of fighting in the village. The Hereros have made prisoners of Bechuana Piet and Calvos. Their carriers have surrendered. They all await the arrival of the troops from Windhoek."

Andy pounced upon the food hungrily. That sleep had done him a world of good.

"We watch turn and turn about until they come," went on his companion. "The Hereros dare not press the attack for fear we kill Oorlo. He has himself explained that to them, but night and day we must take it in turn to watch."

The camera man nodded his head.

"Give me ten minutes, Van, and then I'll take over for the rest of the day. It was real good of you to let me sleep so long. Looks as though we're going to come out on top after all!"

"If our message went through," solemnly qualified the descendant of the Thirst Trekkers. "But I trust Buya."

His trust was justified. On the morning of the seventh day bugles were heard, which the occupants of the ivory store answered with shots. Half an hour later a mixed force of three hundred men, under a Major Manners, marched in at the open gates of the kraal and relieved the two weary, pale faced men who brought Oorlo out to make submission to the Law.

It was typical of Andy Wallace that his first desire was to have his camera kit brought up from the place where he had cached it. Then for days after, while the confiscated ivory and cattle were being dealt with by the British, Andy and his familiar tripod were seen wherever there was action. Bechuana Piet, Calvos, even old Oorlo, all prisoners now, were forced to sit for him. When at last the force marched back to the railhead, leaving the Hereros very much subdued, the camera man knew he had a pictorial record that would earn Dennis Moore's praise and envy.

A Yarn of the Stormy Petrels of the Front Lines

CAMEL NATURE

By NEIL T. MCMILLAN

"COME here, you strung-out, blistering bunch of blasted whatnot!" Tub Weatherford yelled to his crew chief in a voice that was like thunder.

A lanky youth, in greasy fatigue clothes, left the end of the Camel's wing where he had helped Tub taxi into the line, walked to the cockpit and solemnly saluted.

"Never mind the military bunk," Tub stormed as he unfastened his safety belt and climbed from his seat. "I'm going to talk to you, man to man."

He jerked off his gloves and poked a thick finger against the mechanic's chest.

"You're one of the biggest mistakes that ever happened. You must have been clear at the end of the line when they were dishing out brains. You're an empty headed—uh—uh—aw hell! You're everything that's brainless. Get me? Now, get mad and take a poke at me. I want an excuse to mop up the earth with you."

The grave look on Joe Dawson's red face gradually changed and the traces of a grin appeared about the corners of his mouth.

"What's the matter, sir?" he asked innocently. "Did she spin again?"

"Ow!" Tub howled and raised his arms as high as his tight flying suit would allow him. "Ow! Did she spin? Why, you grinning monkey, she won't do anything else. Did she spin? Now, listen! Wipe that smile off your face and find out what's wrong, *toot sweet.*"

The grin obediently faded from Dawson's face.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I've looked her over a hundred times and she's all okay so far as I can see."

"Listen!" Tub exploded. "Don't start that spiel again. Get the dust out of your brains and let's see some action. Let's see if your head can be used for something else besides keeping your ears apart."

"Yes, sir," Dawson said meekly.

"Now get busy," Tub added and waddled away.

"Oh, Lieutenant Weatherford!" a voice called.

Tub stopped angrily and looked over his shoulder.

"Yes, sir," he said respectfully.

Major Forsyth beckoned and Tub, expecting to be bawled out for giving a bawling out, answered the summons.

"I take it, Weatherford, that you don't particularly like your ship."

"Like it?" Tub exclaimed. Blistering words leapt into his brain to describe his ship, but remained unspoken. There was a vast difference between a sergeant and a major, even in the air service. They couldn't be spoken to in quite the same way.

"You guessed it, sir," he finished lamely. "I don't. In fact, in my estimation, there never was a worse ship made."

"What was the trouble today?"

"Same old trouble. She spun."

"I think," said the major, "I'll have a try at that ship, myself."

"Don't do it, sir. Lieutenants are easy to find, but good majors are scarce."

"Thank you, Weatherford, for the compliment. Here, hold my cap for me."

Major Forsyth pulled a helmet and goggles from his pocket and fitted them to his head as he walked to the Camel. Tub followed him to the cockpit.

"Anything special you want done with the remains?" he asked.

"Well," the major said and grinned, "you might try burying them."

For the first time in his flying life, Tub hoped that a fellow pilot would crash, not hard enough to be killed, but yet hard enough to "wash out" the ship and vindicate himself.

But the major took off perfectly, climbed high, came back over the field and while the rest of Tub's patrol whistled in and landed, put the Camel through all of the known acrobatics. Everyone watched as he brought it down close to the ground and executed vertical banks above the hangar roof. Tub caught sight of a broad grin on Dawson's face and looked for something to throw at the offending crew chief.

The major side slipped over the edge of the field, righted the little ship just off the ground and settled to a perfect landing. Hoping against hope that his superior had found and corrected some trouble in the air, Tub walked out to meet him.

"A sweet little ship," the major said, speaking over Tub's shoulder to Dawson. "It is wonderfully well rigged. Flys itself, almost."

Tub blew out his cheeks and grunted in disgust as a satisfied grin stretched across the mechanic's face.

"There's nothing wrong with your ship," the major continued, addressing Tub. "I suspect the fault lies with the pilot."

Tub's temperature rose instantly and he held his tongue with difficulty. Major Forsyth looked him over critically.

"In fact, Weatherford, I wouldn't be surprised if your weight had something to do with it."

He turned to walk off, stopped as if remembering something and looked back.

"Oh, about the remains, Weatherford. Don't bother about a burial detail. I won't need it."

Tub could think of nothing more devastating to say or do, than to snap out, "Yes, sir," and salute in the most highly military manner.

"Oh," he moaned when he thought everyone was out of earshot. "Oh, you—you—" He turned to the offending Camel, took a deep breath and loosed a tirade against it that consigned it, by various descriptive names, to a place where all water had long since turned to steam.

"What beautiful sentiments," a voice said behind him.

Tub wheeled.

"Oh, hello, Pete," he said sheepishly. "I just had to blow off a little."

"Don't blame you. What did she do? Spin, again?"

"You saw me leave the formation, didn't you?"

"Sure. Four times. Fact is, we're going to call you the Prodigal Son, you leave and come back so often."

"Pete, if I had a good ship, I wouldn't ever leave. I'm not yellow. I'm not afraid of Huns. You know that, don't you?"

"Sure, sure. Nobody's saying anything. But say, Tub, why don't you ground loop her or something?"

"Huh?" Tub grunted.

"Get wise to yourself," Pete continued. "Make a Chinese landing; you know, one wing low. Then, get a new ship. Remember I didn't say it, but there's a corner of this field that's full of nice bumps where almost anything might happen."

Tub gazed at his bunkie in admiration while the germ of an idea that had been planted in his brain grew into a plan.

"Pete, you're my brains, I guess. Hey, Dawson! Come here!"

The mechanic came in a slow walk as if he expected another bawling out.

"Get her going," Tub commanded. "I'm going up and try her out myself. Maybe the major fixed something."

"Yes, sir."

AS TUB taxied out for the take-off, he looked toward the nice bumps and selected the place in which he would bring the Camel down. He roared into the air, banked and came over the field and made a mental verification of his choice of landing spots. Then, he nosed up for altitude to save appearances. An immediate landing and a crash would be sure to cast suspicions upon him.

Three thousand feet above war torn France, he pulled the Camel over in an Immelman turn. The little ship executed the maneuver perfectly. He tried another and was thrilled with the perfect exhibition. Then he put the ship through stunt after stunt, and as he flew, the conviction grew upon him that the major had found and corrected some fault in the air.

"And wouldn't tell me," Tub said to himself, "just to make a monkey out of me."

From the dive after a perfect loop he pulled up in a climbing turn and looked down. The field was directly beneath him. He was selecting a new landing spot in the very center when suddenly, ***kerswish, swish, swish,*** the Camel spun. Tub cursed and fought to pull it out.

Without a moment's hesitation he glided toward the corner of the field and the nice bumps. The plane skimmed the earth, settled, struck and bumped along the uneven ground. Tub gently kicked the rudder. Instantly the ship began a circle that Tub knew would tighten and tip him up on a wing or wipe off the landing gear. He set himself for the crash. The wheels hit one of the nice bumps. The Camel hopped into the air, came down in a straight path, rolled a few feet and stopped.

"Ow!" Tub howled and gritted his teeth. "If you haven't got the world skinned for stubbornness. I can't fly you and I can't crash you."

"A rotten landing, Weatherford," the major said ten minutes later, "but a good recovery. And I saw you go into that spin. It's my opinion that you were carrying too much rudder."

Tub said nothing. He saluted again, more to show his disgust than military courtesy and walked to his quarters. Pete, lying on his bunk, looked up from a letter he was reading. He opened his mouth to speak but Tub clapped a hand over it.

"Don't say it! I don't know what it was going to be, but don't say it."

Pete gurgled and struggled until he had uncovered his mouth.

"Go soak your head," he growled, "and cool off."

Tub apologized immediately.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to get heavy. But Cripes, Pete, can you blame me?"

"Well, why didn't you ground loop her the way I told you to?"

"Aw, I tried but one of your nice bumps straightened her out."

"Well, for the love of Mike, do something to get rid of it. You're getting to be the very devil to live with. Crash it, or put it down in some frog's pasture and burn it."

He rearranged himself on his bunk and raised his letter. Tub took off his flying clothes and laid down on his own bunk. He stared at the ceiling for a long time before again speaking.

"Say, Pete, that's not a bad suggestion."

"Huh? What isn't?"

"That suggestion of yours about putting my crate down in some Frog's pasture and burning it. I would never have thought of that myself."

"Of course you wouldn't. The trouble with you is that your head gets so hot all of your bearings stick."

Tub nodded.

"Yeh, I guess you're right. But, it's beginning to hit on all cylinders now. Yes, sir. On this afternoon's patrol I'm going to have hard luck and crash, and it's going to be very, very unfortunate but my old ship's going to accidentally burn up."

THAT afternoon the Prodigal Son again left the formation. But, he did not return. Instead, he glided down with a dead engine—dead because the switch was cut—toward a green field that beckoned below him, far enough back of the lines to escape shell fire.

The ground came up to meet him and, as it came, Tub grinned with satisfaction. There were no humans near enough to see a pilot who could be quick in spilling a can of gasoline and be careless about striking a match.

The wheels struck the ground and rolled. Then, too late to turn, powerless to rise again, Tub saw a ditch that divided the field. He jerked back on the stick in an effort to make the plane jump it. The Camel rose a few feet, lost all flying speed, pancaked into the mud and stuck. Tub's head shot forward and hit the cowl. Blackness dropped upon him.

With a vague feeling that he had been gone somewhere for a long, long time, Tub heard a dim voice saying,

"He's coming to. Boy! Won't he have a couple of shiners!"

Tub opened swollen eyes and looked up into hazy faces. One of them gradually cleared into the red features of Dawson.

"What happened?" Tub asked.

"You crashed, sir, and got a crack on the head. But it ain't nothing serious. You'll be all okay in a little while."

"Oh, yes, I remember now. Is the bus a washout?"

"No, sir. It ain't hurt none to speak of. We can get her out of the mud and going for you in an hour, sir."

"Ow!" Tub groaned.

"And sir, I found a can in the cockpit that I threw in the ditch. It might cause trouble with the major, sir."

"Ow!" Tub groaned again. "Why didn't you use it?"

"Use it?" Dawson asked with a baby-like stare of innocence. "What for, sir?"

"Aw nothing."

AT DUSK, Tub flew his ship home, landed, climbed from his cockpit and went to his quarters. He kicked the door open and slammed it behind him. Pete sprang to his feet with his fists in front of him. Tub glared. Pete lowered his fists and laughed.

"Wow! What a pair of lamps! Did you get 'em all black in the fire?"

"Fire!' Tub snorted. "Fire! Blah!"

He threw his gloves in a corner and tore at his flying clothes. Pete shook his head mournfully.

"And to think, Tub, that I picked you for a bunkie because you were fat and good-natured."

Tub stopped and stared. Gradually the humor of the thing crept into him. A grin twisted the corners of his mouth. He laughed.

"Say, Pete, I'll have a headache in the morning anyhow, so let's get plastered."

"All right, you're on."

The next morning, Tub grunted as an orderly shook his shoulder.

"Huh?"

"Time for the dawn patrol, sir."

"Huh? Oh, all right."

He sat up in bed and held a hand to his brow.

"Oh, what a head," he muttered.

"Aw shut up," Pete growled. "You're not alone. Stick your head out in the propeller blast as soon as you're up and you'll be all right."

"Yeh," Tub groaned, "I know. And I've got to fly that damned crate again. Oh well, such is war."

He yawned, pulled a flying suit on over his pajamas, slipped his feet into pumps and buckled flying moccasins on over them. His helmet and goggles he adjusted as he and Pete walked out in the fog filled air of a wet dawn. Captain Lake, flight commander, met them.

"Pretty nasty weather for flying," he said, "but orders are to make a patrol, so out we go. And Tub, better be careful about spinning today. The ceiling's awful low."

"Say," Tub asked, "do you think I spin on purpose?"

"No," Lake replied. "Of course not. But be careful."

The five Camels took to the air and, with Pete and Tub on the ends of the V formation, climbed to a scant thousand feet under the clouds. Rocked by the blasts of anti-aircraft guns, they crossed the lines. They had patroled for an hour when Tub looked down and saw fog rolling in beneath them, shutting out the view of the war splotched earth. Lake evidently saw it at the same time for he turned toward home.

As Tub banked he caught a glimpse of a Hun formation a mile away that lost itself in the bottom of the clouds.

For the space of minutes the Camels flew in a level of wet air between two banks of fog. Then, suddenly and seemingly from nowhere, Fokkers dropped upon them, spitting lead as they came. The first warning came to Tub when the smoke of tracers cut the air above his wings.

He looked back at the German diving on his tail, swung into a tight turn, dove, pulled up until he was on his back, flipped over and was under the tail of his enemy. His own guns chattered. The Fokker turned. Tub banked to follow and, *swish*, the Camel went into a spin.

Before he could pull it out, Tub was in the fog below. Fear of hitting the ground caused him to cut his motor. With its roar gone, he listened to the sound of his wires to gauge his speed. The earth suddenly appeared ten feet under him. He leveled out and landed before he had time to become as scared as he should have been.

He exhaled a sigh of relief, drew in a deep breath and cursed the air steed he rode.

"Almost crashed me, didn't you, you damned piece of junk. I suppose I'm in Hunland, a prisoner. Orders are to burn you but I'll be damned if I will."

He climbed from the cockpit. Figures were running toward him through the mist. He couldn't make out the exact color of the uniforms but they were not olive drab, that was certain.

"Here they come. Let 'em have you. Let 'em copy you. I hope they build a thousand like you."

With his hands in the air he stalked off toward the figures. Fifty yards from his ship, he stopped, clenched his hands into fists and howled.

"They're not Huns, they're Frogs. Oh, why didn't I burn the damned thing when I had a chance?"

HIGH in a clear sky, Tub rode the same plane that afternoon. The fog was gone. Only occasional clouds, still above him and the rest of his formation, at fifteen thousand feet showed what might have become of the mist.

Half a mile to the left was a French formation of Nieuports. Lower and between the two Allied groups was a German two-seater that circled lazily as if directing artillery fire. Above it was a flat bottomed cloud.

It looked like a trap and Tub knew that Lake thought so, for the flight commander circled warily and put the sun at their backs. But the French formation suddenly dove on the lone Hun.

Before the Nieuports were halfway down in their dive, Fokkers spilled over the edge of the cloud and followed. Instantly Lake wagged his wings for his pilots to follow and slid down the sun beams to surprise the Huns. Tub picked out his foe and muttered to his ship.

"If you spin this time, I hope it'll be the end. You're bound to crash me sooner or later so let's have it sooner."

The huns overtook the French. Instantly the two orderly formations went into a mad whirl of dueling ships. The Camels roared into the mêlee. Tub looked into the startled, upturned face of his Hun and pressed his triggers. Instantly the Fokker skidded out of range. Tub wheeled and dove. The hun dove also. Tub gave chase, but the superior speed of the Fokker enabled the German to gradually draw away.

With an exasperated flip, Tub pulled up and banked. The dog fight was gone. Where it had been two Nieuports were spinning down in flames and the sky was swarming with Fokkers. The Camels were thousands of feet below and streaking for home. Tub realized that more of the enemy must have followed his own formation. He turned to also fly toward safety.

A shadow flicked across his wings. With a violent start he twisted in his seat. Three Huns were coming down. Beneath him was the one he had been chasing. Stark fear swept over him. He was boxed!

Whether he turned or flew straight ahead, a Hun would be on his tail. If he dove, the Fokker below would blister the belly of his Camel. A sudden sob of helplessness rose in his throat. The center hun dove. Tub watched the twin guns. They came close. The kill would be certain.

Hot anger flooded him. Someone would go to hell with him. He jerked his Camel straight up. The German whirled his ship and missed colliding by a hand breadth. The second banked away to miss the first but the third dove in for the death thrust, firing as he came.

With fascinated eyes, Tub watched the tracers cut through his wing. They moved toward the fuselage. So this was to be the end, the shock of bullets and then . . . Tub's body grew tense in expectancy. *Kerswish!* The Camel whipped out of the fire in a spin.

Tub yelled in sheer relief. Instinct

caused him to fight the whirling ship. It straightened in a dive. It came up in a zoom and Tub gasped in surprise. He was directly under the tail of an enemy. He pressed his triggers. The German's head jerked over the side of the fuselage and the eyes widened in horror as Tub tucked a seam of death along the belly of the Fokker.

Guns chattered behind him. Tub deliberately pulled the Camel up, into the path of the Hun. The Fokker banked. *Swish!* The Camel half spun and came up under the German tail.

"Two," Tub muttered as the second Fokker careened crazily and slid away.

"And here's another," he said as he skyrocketed in front of a third Fokker and totally ignored the bullet holes that jumped in a row down one wing and across his flippers. This German, like the others, banked suddenly to avoid colliding. Tub kicked rudder to help the Camel in its inevitable spin.

Before it had made half a turn, he pulled it out and slid up under the tail of his foe. His guns sang their song of hate. Vapor flew from the gas tank of the Fokker. Red flame burst out in a fan.

"Three," Tub counted.

He looked for the fourth. That gentleman was keeping discreetly at a distance, waiting for help. Tub didn't wait. He nosed down and roared for home.

"WHERE'S that long drink of water I've got for a crew chief?" he yelled as soon as his engine had stopped on the home field.

"Here, sir."

"Well, come here, I've got something to say to you."

Dawson walked up like a proud dog afraid of being whipped.

"You know what this is?" Tub asked and patted the fuselage of the ship.

"Yes, sir. It's the worst thing this side of hell and I'm the worst crew chief that was ever born and I ain't got nothing between the ears and——"

"You're a liar," Tub interrupted. "A cockeyed liar. This is the best combat ship in the world and you're the best crew chief in any army, bar none."

* * *

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, of *Everybody's Magazine*, published monthly, at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1928. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Osbury Smith, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Assistant Treasurer of The Ridgway Company, publisher of *Everybody's Magazine*, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor and business managers are: Publisher, The Ridgway Company, Spring & Macdougal Streets, N. Y. C.; Editor, William Corcoran, 223 Spring Street, N. Y. C.; Managing Editor, None. Business Managers, None. 2. That the owner is: The Ridgway Company, a corporation, Spring and Macdougal Streets, New York City, whose stockholder is: The Butterick Company, a corporation, Spring and Macdougal Streets, New York City, whose stockholders are: J. S. Bache & Co., 42 Broadway, New York City; Chas. D. Barney & Co., 65 Broadway, New York City; Morris Cohn, 60 Park Place, Newark, New Jersey; Hayden, Stone & Co., 87 Milk Street, Boston, Mass.; E. F. Hutton & Co., 61 Broadway, New York City; F. B. Keech & Co., 52 Broadway, New York City; Stanley R. Latshaw, Butterick Bldg., 223 Spring Street, New York City; Luke, Banks & Weeks, 14 Wall Street, New York City; Merrick & Co., c/o Customers' Securities Dept.; The New York Trust Co., 100 Broadway, New York City; Jos. A. Moore, 300 Park Avenue, New York City; Moore & Schley, 100 Broadway, New York City; E. A. Pierce & Co., 11 Wall Street, New York City; Post & Flagg, 49 Broad Street, New York City. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Osbury Smith, Assistant Treasurer. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 28th day of September, 1928. Chappell Cory, Jr., Notary Public, New York County, County Clerk's No. 474 Reg. No. 0-586, Kings Co. Clerk's No. 206 Reg. No. 461.—(*My commission expires March 30, 1930*)—[*Seal*]. Form 3526.—Ed. 1924.

Everybody's Meeting PLACE

Where writers, readers and the editor gather for informal discussion

THE DEATH RACERS

LAST summer a certain news story crashed the front pages of practically every paper in the world. The details have evaded my recollection, but I remember it in substance. The story reported the tragic outcome of an auto race at the Milan track in Italy. In the race a car driven at top speed got out of control and tore through the barriers into a packed crowd of spectators. Eighteen people were killed outright, including the driver, and the ill-fated auto was reduced to splinters and twisted metal.

The impression this news story made on me might have faded quickly if the manuscript of *Greased Brakes* had not arrived a few days later. I needed no assurance then to believe that the suspense **Barry Lyndon** created in his vivid tale was real and true.

Since this story is his first in the magazine, he offers a few words about himself. I am reliably informed that this modest account is but a pale reflection of a remarkably eventful career. Four years of war and ten years of varied activity, from auto racing to fiction writing, should provide enough thrills for several lifetimes.

Born during the period when an average speed of 16 M.P.H. was enough to win an international motor car race.

Held the record, at the age of ten years, of having helped push more broken down cars than any other boy in London. We lived opposite the world's first worst garage.

Joined a rifle regiment at 8 A.M August 4th, 1914. But, finding that the infantry had no craze for speed, quit them and drove mules, lorries, field cookers and machine gun limbers in France and Flanders. Narrowly escaped a court-martial for racing a male tank against a female ditto just behind Arras. Visited Ypres during the Paschendaele push and collected, on the same evening: shell-shock, minor shrapnel scratches, mustard gas and trench fever.

Emerged from hospital to find the War over and to be faced with a free choice between becoming a member of the Rhodesian Mounted Police, a pig farmer in Wales, or hitching up with a firm of engineers. Tossed a lucky penny, and the engineers won.

Visited Brooklands speedway one month later and was bitten by a bookmaker and the speed bug. The latter bid harder than the bookie. In a state of high fever was taken around the track on an old 90 H.P. Mercedes, the driver apologizing because it would not do more than 95 M.P.H. Everybody at Brooklands seems to apologize if their cars will not do 100 M.P.H. Have owned various cars, but have had to apologize for them all. Hope to be able to buy a real speed model some day; have been able only to borrow them so far.

First magazine story published when the writer was fifteen years old. The publishers paid six dollars for it, and also used it. For months afterwards was able to smile pityingly at any mention of millionaires, but have never since quite equaled the ecstasy of receiving that six dollar check.

Barry Lyndon

THE MOST DANGEROUS SPORT

SINCE reading **Barry Lyndon**'s story, I've taken to wondering just which form of sport might be called the most reckless. Flying has tended to become a business or profession, rather than a sport; and would be a questionable entry among the activities under consideration. Auto racing has an economic background, but it remains pure sport making a bid for popular interest. Certainly it is one of the most hazardous of all forms of human enterprise. The only other I can think of at the moment is mountain climbing.

Will some of you who have participated

in dangerous competitive speed or endurance tests or feats of skill of any kind give us your opinion? Having started on this train of thought, I'd like to finish it.

A WESTERN READER

HERE is a part of a letter unfortunately too long to print in full, but too interesting to go straight to the obscurity of the office files. I quote a goodly portion of it. *The Desert Bell,* a story of the Southwest by a native of the country, ERNEST DOUGLAS, appeared last May. After commenting on this story and sundry other matters, the letter continues:

Speaking of Mr. Douglas' *Desert Bell* reminds me of an incident which occurred one day last May while I was riding on a train to Los Angeles. I was occupied with the reading of this story at the time, and while thus engaged a well dressed middle aged gentleman boarded the train at a little town on the way and seated himself beside me. He evidently observed the subject of my interest, for upon my completion of the story he asked my opinion of it. I answered that I thought it a splendid tale; that it had taken me quite close to home, and that I had enjoyed it.

He did not answer at once; he was apparently studying my reply. Finally he slowly shook his head.

"I read that yarn a few days ago," he said. "I considered it rather far fetched; even bordering on the unlikely and, in fact, quite unworthy of the 'Old Everybody's' "

At these remarks I became at once both amused and concerned; and immediately took upon myself the championing of my favorite magazine, and the saving of a reader about to depart the fold. With much patience, some argument, an occasional reference to history and considerable recounting of personal experiences, I proceeded to win him over. The result was that, when we parted at our destination, he thanked me warmly for having enlightened him on what he admitted was an interesting subject; and went his way with renewed friendship for the *New* Everybody's—much to my personal elation.

Now, my friend of the day coach was by no means an uneducated man. On the contrary, I learned from him that he was a graduate of an Eastern college, and that he had at one time been a member of the Canadian Royal Mounted Police, serving for a number of years in the eastern part of the Dominion, but having since retired and taken up permanent residence in the United States. The fact is, however, that he knew little about the Southwest; which fact, I feel, should have better governed his remarks about the story. But, alas! The reading public was ever thus. Was not Lincoln right when he said:

"No man ever lived but that he displeased half the world?"

I suppose that goes for editors, too; but I take pleasure, nevertheless, in boosting a magazine I think deserves boosting, and in so doing, helping its editor who, I have a hunch is a good scout, and with whom I'd like nothing better than to shake hands and talk things over.

In looking through the May issue while writing this letter, I again came upon Mr. Ray Howland's letter, published in the *Meeting Place,* in which he described the strange music heard in the Superstition Mountains of Arizona. If I may take this somewhat late opportunity to comment on that. I should like to say that it is very characteristic of the desert regions, being, I believe, one of Nature's tricks with sound and atmosphere similar perhaps to the trick she plays with atmosphere and the refraction of light rays in producing the more common mirage. I have, on two or three occasions, experienced a like sensation in cañons of the Colorado Desert; the sounds being quite similar to those described by Mr. Howland, although not as consistent, occurring only rarely. It is, however, quite possible that in certain localities, when the natural arrangement is right, these sounds could recur with almost daily regularity. The desert fairly abounds with such weird and mystifying oddities. My own appetite for adventure and exploration in these regions has so often been appeased by fascinating discoveries and pleasant sensations that I no longer regard any reported natural phenomenon as beyond possibility.

No, I had not read Van Dyke's "The Desert" up until the arrival of your much appreciated letter, but have since, however, and the little volume now reposes on my select shelf with others of its kind. I certainly thank you for your personal interest in making the suggestion, and I enjoyed the book very much.

Harold A. Bates,
Riverside, California

THE ROAD TO FAME

ONE of the most unusual letters to be printed in these columns was that by Ray Howland described in the communication above. Some time ago Mr. Howland wrote to me again, reporting the astonishing results of his letter's appearance. I think the details are too good to keep.

Here is Howland's account of these matters:

Really, Mr. Corcoran, I didn't know that there were so many people in the world interested in the outlands!

I started something when I wrote a letter to you. You finished it when you printed it.

I sure get a kick out of some of the letters that I have received. I get plenty—dozens of them. Some from flappers who imagine that I must be a romantic cowpuncher, some from old-timers who never dreamed of such a thing except after a souse or a whiff or marihuana, some from spiritualists who would like me to believe that the spirits are making merry, some from naturalists. In fact, I get them from all corners of this glorious country of ours.

I have a bunch of photographs of sweet young things here that would make Flo Ziegfeld sit up and take notice. He'd sure ask for their addresses!

Ray Rowland

And here is a clipping from the local newspaper, the Mesa, Arizona, *Tribune:*

Buried under an avalanche of "fan mail", Ray Howland, famed seeker of the Lost Dutchman, spreader of Duco, and now widely known as "the big, strong, silent man of the Superstitions", is sending out frantic calls for help.

If the deluge keeps up, Howland is going to need seven secretaries and his own private photographer, likewise a Congressional appropriation to meet the frightful expense that threatens to engulf him in bankruptcy, even if he finds the Lost Dutchman next trip out and it proves to be twice as rich as tradition has it.

Howland's trouble started when he wrote a letter to EVERYBODY'S a few months ago, describing a certain "musical mountain" that he claims to have discovered in the course of his rambles about the Superstitions. According to his story, which has not yet been authenticated by the American Spiritualist Association or the National Geographic Society, but is solemnly vouched for by the League of Hassayampers, there is a place where the air is filled with weird, melodious sounds that cannot be attributed to wind whistling through the rocks, since they can be heard when there is not a breath of air stirring.

ROLL OF HONOR

NOTHING is more controversial than an arbitrary selection of "best stories." But it is always interesting to study another's judgments, whether we agree with them or not. In this case of the following list, the judge is Edward J. O'Brien, well known short story critic and editor of the series of annual volumes of which the latest is *The Best Short Stories of 1928.* I submit his honor roll from EVERYBODY'S with gratification but without comment, since I was not editor of the magazine when most of these were purchased.

(THREE STAR)

Old Sails		
A. E. Dingle	January	1928

(ONE STAR)

Roll and Go		
A. E. Dingle	September	1927
Bag of Gold Coins		
Raymond S. Spears	October	1927
Clock for the Saddler		
Raymond S. Spears	October	1927
Tears on a Cowboy's Grave		
Raymond S. Spears	October	1927
Killer		
A. E. Dingle	November	1927
Wrong Kind of Killing		
Raymond S. Spears	November	1927
Devil of a Joke		
Raymond S. Spears	November	1927
Out of the Night		
T. T. Flynn	December	1927
Lone Clearing		
Charles G. D. Roberts	December	1927
Light on Little Hope		
A. E. Dingle	May	1928

MEET THE AUTHOR

HERE is a newcomer to whom we can extend a very cordial welcome. *Piracy at Pebble Creek* is his first story in EVERYBODY'S. He writes close to the earth indeed, and possesses the two exceedingly winning virtues of sincerity and unassuming modesty. His brother and literary mentor is the well known Frank C. Robertson.

To begin with, I have never traveled. All my life, which consists of more years than I care to enumerate, has been spent in the range country of Idaho, Utah, and Nevada. Consequently I lay no claims to knowing the customs and procedure of the entire West, but I am quite familiar with my own particular corner. If my stories fail to carry atmosphere and conviction it is due to my lack of ability as a writer, and not to any scarcity of experience.

Personally, I have probably experienced my share of mild adventure, and more than my share of hardships; but in spite of hardships, the range country has always held a fascination for me, and even now, after being softened by three years of city life, I still have a hankerin' to get back to the wide open spaces, where a disposition to be of service is reconized and appreciated.

As to how I came to start writing, it was more accident than design. About four years ago I had the good or bad fortune of being a trifle slow in getting my leg away from a falling horse, with the result that I suffered a rather severe break. My brother was at that time meeting with a fair amount of success as a fiction writer, and like most everyone else who meets up with a story writer I imagined that I had a story that would be to his interest to write, but not having the time or inclination to listen to my chatter he suggested that I write it. Having nothing else to do, and being unable to get out of the house, I followed his suggestion and made the attempt. That it was a weird bit of work goes without saying, but without doing very much more work than he would have done on one of his own original ideas, Frank managed to straighten it into a saleable story. My next two attempts were in the same manner successful, and likewise showed up my lack of education to the extent that I was forced to make an attempt to correct it. It still needs correction, but I have made some progress, and I don't know how to quit.

Obe Robertson

FROM THE BLACK DIAMOND COUNTRY

A RECENT gold-mining story prompted me to reminisce a bit in the *Meeting Place* about the anthracite region where I was born. Here is a letter from a reader in whom my words struck a responsive chord. Can someone give us an account of the catastrophe in question? I am not familiar with the episode myself, but I can readily conceive how intensely dramatic it must have been.

> I happened to notice in the November issue your remark about Wilkes-Barre. See if you can get some old friend out there to tell you about the Lackawanna River breaking through its bed about four years ago and pouring into the workings near the Scranton-Taylor line. If you can get someone who knows, you'll have a story of fighting water that will raise your hair.
>
> I was with the telephone company in Scranton at the time, but don't know enough details to tell the story myself.
>
> I would prefer that my name not be published if you should print this, as my profession, while honorable, demands that I do not advertise—in fact there are one or two who have my name painted on their rods, permanent.
>
> Sure like the new EVERYBODY'S. Am somewhat of a rover myself—start for Algiers within a week.

SHOP TALK

SOMETHING new in heroes appears in RAYMOND S. SPEARS', *Proofs Positive.* I cannot remember meeting a desert town newspaper editor before in that rôle. Most assuredly this story is no conventional Western, against which so many readers fulminate in lengthy letters . . . Another tale I present with joy is R. E. HAMILTON'S, *The Man Who Buried the Undertaker.* This, too, happens to be set in the West. I cannot feel that the fact requires any apology. There is a quaint and audacious humor to the story that won me completely. For my part, I feel confident that R. E. Hamilton, if ordered to write about the most hackneyed setting possible to conceive, could go to work and turn out a tale as different from its predecessors as a nugget in a row of pebbles . . . Another old friend of the magazine returns in this issue, fresh from recent literary conquests in other fields. MILLARD WARD'S *Not Kneeling* is a delightful yarn with a salty brand of humor and a real dramatic punch. He will be with us soon again . . . Readers ask repeatedly for stories by GEORGES SURDEZ. I have at last persuaded this famous author to give us a tale of North Africa. You'll find it leading the February issue—a novelette of genuine emotion and sweeping movement. Surdez sailed just last month for another visit to Algiers and the great Sahara. Before embarking he promised to send us more stories of the Legion and the desert raiders . . . Next month there will appear in EVERYBODY'S, for the first time in many years, another famous author, EDGAR WALLACE. He writes vividly of Central Africa, of the jungle and the towering black warriors of the Bantu tribes. Wallace, as you may have read in recent news accounts, has achieved this year what is probably a record for literary versatility and labor—with half a dozen plays produced, several books published, a couple of movies exhibited and a few dozen short stories printed, all within a twelvemonth . . . There are other items of interest concerning the truly splendid line-up in this coming issue, but I shall reserve them till you have read the stories yourselves. It's a perfectly swell issue . . . And, oh yes—it will come with a cover that is the final step in our present metamorphosis, still different from the last two, and one that will make EVERYBODY'S outstanding on every newsstand in the land. Keep an eye peeled for it on the 20th.

WILLIAM CORCORAN

THE NEWS OF NEXT MONTH

THE BERBER

By GEORGES SURDEZ

Introducing to Everybody's this famous author of North African tales with a colorful novelette of the swift French Spahis and a famous desert raider they hunted on the blazing sands of the great Sahara.

OUT TO WESTWARD

by Robert E. Pinkerton

A stirring romance of the North Pacific islands, where a rich gold lode was lost and a deserted steamer found—and where two gallant young people met the adventure of their lives.

THE DUDE RANCH MYSTERY

by E. S. Pladwell

We have specified that our Westerns must be different; here is one—a gay and thrilling tale of the eternal rangeland, where color and courage and romance will never die.

AND EIGHT SHORT STORIES

Among them L. Murney Mintzer's remarkable tale of submarine warfare, "The Armed Guard"; Edgar Wallace's unusual story of Africa's throbbing jungles, "The Keepers of the Treasure"; Thomas Thursday's humorous yarn of the sawdust performers, "And Howe!"; H. M. Sutherland's exciting account of a battle to death above the clouds, "The Grandstander"; and L. G. Blochman's tale of the inscrutable East, "Burmese Code".